

A woman with light brown hair styled in a bun is seated in an ornate wooden chair, reading an open book. She is wearing a vibrant green Victorian-style dress with a white lace collar and ruffled sleeves. The background is a library with tall wooden bookshelves filled with books. The lighting is warm and focused on the woman.

ARIA NORTON

A
GENTLEMAN
IN DISGUISE

A Gentleman in Disguise

A REGENCY ROMANCE NOVEL

ARIA NORTON

All Rights Reserved.

This book may not be reproduced or transmitted in any form without the written permission of the publisher.

In no way is it legal to reproduce, duplicate, or transmit any part of this document in either electronic means or in printed format. Recording of this publication is strictly prohibited and any storage of this document is not allowed unless with written permission from the publisher.

Table of Contents

A Gentleman in Disguise

Table of Contents

A Gentleman in Disguise

Introduction

Chapter 1

A Race for the Duke's Heart

Introduction

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

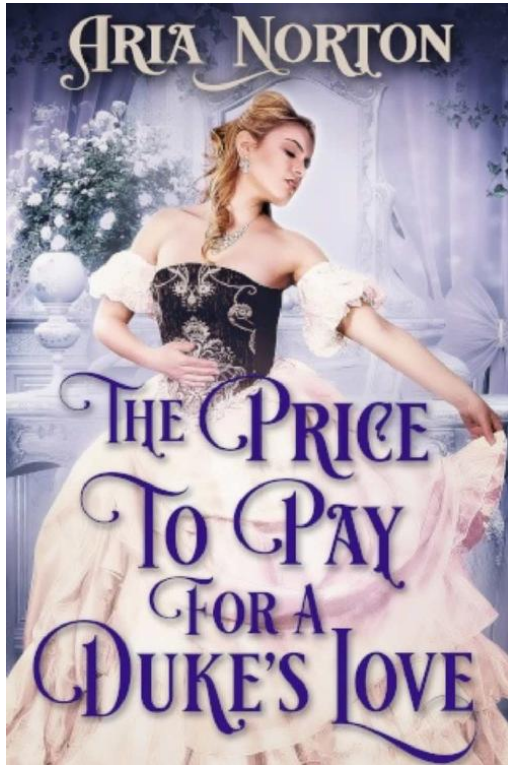
Free Exclusive Gift

Sign up for my mailing list to be notified of hot new releases and get my latest **Full-Length Novel** “**The Price to Pay for a Duke's Love**”

(available only to my subscribers) for FREE!

Click the link or enter it into your browser

<http://arianorton.com/lilah>



A Gentleman in Disguise

Introduction

Lydia Seabrook comes from a long line of women known for their literary talent. Aspiring to follow the path her writing passion indicates, she is shocked to find herself about to become a duchess instead. Marrying the Duke of Moreland is the last thing Lydia would want, so she will do whatever it takes to become an author. With this in mind, she persuades her father to allow her one year to prove her potential and have her work published. How could she ever do it all by herself though?

If only someone could help her prove her worth to the world...

Perhaps that someone could be Darius Frost, the man Lydia's father hires as her tutor, if it wasn't for his immense repulsion for nobility. Having to care for his brother's family though did not leave him with any other choice but to compromise. However, once he starts tutoring Miss Seabrook, a spark of doubt for his previous prejudice lights up in his heart, warming it up for what's about to come. Could it be that he found the first noblewoman to be truly honourable?

And most importantly, has he met the only woman who could prove him wrong and his heart right?

If only their growing love could have prepared them for the new

threat that lay ahead. The Duke of Moreland realises that the dowry from his marriage to Lydia is at risk and will stop at nothing to restore his wealth. Even if that means using blackmail to destroy this blossoming romance. Are Darius and Lydia able to rise above society's expectations and follow their hearts? Or are they destined to be torn apart forever by the wicked Duke?

Chapter 1

“Ah, there she is,” the Duke of Moreland said with a grin as his green eyes seemed to swallow Lydia Seabrook whole.[1]

She tried not to cringe, but there was something about the hunger in his eyes that deeply bothered Lydia. She held her head high, despite her discomfort, and remained polite for the sake of her mother and father. They all stood at the base of the stairs, as though waiting for something important to take place.

The Duke of Moreland was tall and broad, very handsome with those green eyes and that thick tuft of brown hair. He was rich and powerful. He was devoted to his mother.

And he was a terrible rake with pride that Lydia found utterly disgusting.[2]

“Your Grace, I apologise if I have kept you waiting,” she said in a tone that she hoped sounded friendlier than she felt.

“Even a man such as myself would be willing to wait for the honourable daughter of Lord Seabrook,” he said with false charm. Then again, Lydia had seen his impatience at more than a few balls when he had wandered off with young women the moment their chaperones turned their backs.

After the family had eaten dinner with the Duke, Lydia had been utterly repulsed by him and found an excuse to go upstairs and take a moment to catch her breath. She knew that all of this was simply a dinner designed for her to get to know the Duke better. Her father clearly wished for the two of them to marry eventually, but Lydia was horrified by the thought.

The Duke had spent the entire evening going on about his wealth, sharing why he was so important. He also claimed that he was known for his nobility when Lydia knew well that he was known for flirting with women and she had heard rumours about two different young women who were caught in compromising positions with him. It seemed that he was a liar as well as a rake.

Of course, once she had gotten to her room, there was only one thing Lydia could do in order to calm herself. She had taken out paper and ink and wrote a few pages of her novel before he maid came to collect her, saying her mother and father insisted.

“Lydia,” her mother hissed as she glanced down at Lydia’s inkstand hands. Lydia immediately stood with them crossed behind her back.

“If you would do me the honour,” the Duke began, looking at Lydia, “I would very much like to speak with you *alone* for a moment.”

She paused, desperately wanting to avoid this situation. She was also uncomfortable with the way he stressed wanting to be alone with her. If the Duke insisted upon speaking with her, she would have no choice, but that didn’t mean she had to be friendly. After all, it was awful to have to engage with him. More than anything, she just wanted to escape this moment, to get away from him.

But Lydia understood her obligation. It would be painfully embarrassing for her family, shameful even, if she refused. With that in mind, she gave a slight nod in agreement.

“Very well. If you would like to speak, we may do so,” she replied.

Lydia followed him, along with the maid as a chaperone. They made their way to the drawing room where he instantly turned to her and began to speak.

“Miss Seabrook, I am delighted to have this moment alone with you. Please sit,” he said, gesturing to the settee in Lydia’s own home, as though it was his to offer. She did as instructed and waited as he paced, speaking with great excitement.

“I wanted to speak with you regarding the future. You see, I know that you are out in society and have been for nearly three years. It is clear that you must find a husband, and very quickly. I am sure you would be honoured to learn that I am interested in providing you that very thing,” he said, drawing closer than she desired. He was being far too familiar for propriety’s sake.

Lydia looked at him in confusion. He certainly wasn’t being clear. She desperately hoped that he was not suggesting what she thought he was.

“I beg your pardon, Lord Moreland?”

“Miss Seabrook, I am asking you if you would be my wife,” he said with insistence.

Lydia was horrified. She couldn't believe that he was actually asking her this. Did he not know that there was a way to go about these things? Moreover, did he not realise that she would never agree to this? [It was a shock to think that he would dare when he had never even courted her.](#) [3]It was also a shock to think that her mother and father would allow her to be alone with him when this was clearly his intention from the beginning.

“Lord Moreland! I never expected this! How could you possibly propose to me? This is not how it is done,” she said, hoping he would understand.

“Whatever do you mean, Miss Seabrook? I am a duke and I am perfectly within my rights to choose a fine young lady to marry. Your father being in the House of Lords, it is understandable that I might pick a bride who is from a noble family such as yours. Why would you question it? Do you think yourself unworthy of my affections?” he asked, flattering himself.

“Certainly not, Your Grace,” she snapped as his face fell. “What I meant to say was that you are meant to court me and then ask my father's permission before you come to me like this.”

Lydia was appalled that he had been so bold, but she also knew that once he realised the error of proposing to her without the proper methods, the Duke of Moreland would have to undo his proposal and give her the freedom she desired to step away from him and never see him again.

But it was clear that the Duke was not going to back down just because she had pointed out the traditional custom. His eyes were full of pride and his own ideas of what must happen between them.

“Miss Seabrook, I appreciate your devotion toward society's rules, but you ought to know that it is already done,” he said.

Staring at him in confusion for a moment, Lydia waited for an explanation. She couldn't understand what he meant by that.

“I beg your pardon?”

“I have already spoken with your father. Perhaps you do not consider us as having courted, but I have watched you for some time and this evening was a chance to get to know you better and to be certain that I truly wished to make you my wife. [4]As it happens, my idea was confirmed. When I spoke to your father about the arrangement, he was perfectly happy to agree and told me that I have his blessing to marry you. I would never betray the customs of society on such a grand issue,” he explained.

“M-my father? He already agreed for us to be married?” Lydia asked.

“Indeed, he did. In fact, he seemed rather excited by the prospect. I take it you were not aware that he had this wish?” he asked.

And there it was. The fact that it had already been arranged. She still couldn’t believe that her father had allowed this, or that he had given her no warning. Nevertheless, the deal was done and Lydia had no choice. That is, she had no choice but to beg her father.

Although she had no intention of embarrassing herself or her family, she could not remain there with the Duke of Moreland. Lydia ran from the room, ignoring the fact that it was rather unladylike and that it was likely going to cause offense.

She didn’t care anymore. She would not allow her life to be decided by a man as proud and repulsive as this one.

“Father!” she exclaimed, rushing through the door of his study. He looked up at her and smiled.

“Good heavens! I expected that you would come in here with the Duke of Moreland, not on your own. You must be excited to know that you are to become a duchess very soon,” he said, jovially.

“Father, no! You cannot make me marry him,” she begged, falling to her knees beside his chair.

His expression shifted into one of confusion and disappointment. He glanced at the door, clearly waiting for the Duke to come in and explain.

“Do you hear me, Father? I cannot marry him. The Duke of Moreland is an awful man. He is so arrogant and repulsive to me. Please, Father, do not make me marry him,” she pleaded, hopeful that her father would see it from her perspective.

He didn’t answer right away, but Lydia sensed that he was at least considering her plight. Still, he began to slowly shake his head and look away from her.

“Lydia, this is the best thing for you. I would not make you marry someone I thought would bring you any harm. I want you to be happy in life, but you need to understand that marrying a man such as the Duke is a wonderful gift. He can make you happy,” he promised.

“But, Father, you know that I have a future of my own making,” Lydia insisted.

“Darling, your future is not within your own hands. I know what it is that you want in life, but you must remember how very hard it is for a woman to become a writer. You have to pretend you are someone else entirely. And you will have to convince the world that you are worthy of their time and attention. As much as you wish to have this life, it is impractical. I am sure you will realise that in time,” he said.

“You are not listening to me, Father. I can do this. I can be the writer that I hope to be and you always encouraged me to do so,” she reminded him.

“Your mother and grandmother were both excellent, but they will tell you that it was a difficult life, trying to be successful. Now, you are at the point in your life where you may decide whether or not you wish to continue trying to follow in their footsteps or you may live a comfortable life. I suggest you choose the latter,” he said.

“But that is not what I want, Father. I want to be the writer that I know I am capable of being,” she said.

“It is very difficult to be published, Lydia. You know that already. You have struggled with finding anyone to take your work and prepare it for the masses. While I know how passionate you are about writing, you must also be able to find an opportunity and you have not yet done so,” her father said, his eyes taking on a sense of compassion.

“Father, there is a reason for that,” she said.

He sighed, allowing her to continue. In truth, Lydia felt as though she had been backed into a corner with very few options. She didn't know what to do other than to beg and, with that in mind, she gave herself a moment to consider her options and, at last, she came up with an idea for a compromise.

"Please, listen to my request," Lydia said.

"I will listen, my dear, but I need you to remember that I am only able to do so much," he said. "I made a promise that he could propose to you."

"I understand that, Father, but I am asking you to think about another option. You know that I wish to be a writer, that I wish to make this my career and my life. but you are also correct that I have not managed to be published yet. If I am going to achieve my goals, I need to be skilled enough to do better than this," she said.

"And?"

"And I am asking that you indulge me. Just for a year. If the Duke truly cares for me, he will be willing to wait. But in that year, please allow me to have a tutor who will help me grow in my skill," she said.

He raised an eyebrow at her idea and she sensed his uncertainty. Nevertheless, Lydia could see that he was truly considering it and she hoped this was a sign that he would give her what she wanted.

"That is an intriguing request," he said.

"And? Do you think that my request might be granted? Think about it, Father. It would be the best thing for me. And then, if I still am not able to be published, I will marry the Duke. If, however, I have accomplished my goal, you will allow me to pursue this work," she said.

He took a deep breath as he thought about her suggestion, but Lydia's thoughts were wildly traipsing about her mind. She knew that she was a good writer, but she needed more training. The publishers she had approached all seemed to tell her the same thing. She had skill, but she needed to put more heart into her work. She was not yet able to translate the fulness of her own emotion into the words on the page.

If she had a tutor, she would be able to change this and it would make all the difference she needed. Then again, she had also had one publisher dismiss her purely for the fact that she was a woman. She knew that a tutor might be able to help her get around this prejudice.

Lydia longed to be financially independent. If she could just get started, she believed things would flow with ease and her life could be everything she dreamt it could be. She wouldn't have to marry and her life would be her own.

"You will marry the Duke whe—if you are unsuccessful?" he asked, catching himself. Lydia tried not to show her offense that he didn't believe she could achieve this.

"If I am given no other choice and if he proves that he is willing to wait for me, then yes. I will marry him if I am incapable of doing what I wish to do with my life," she said, thinking about the day she could find her own book in one of the London bookshops.

"I must be mad, but I think I have made a decision. Your mother would be furious with me if I refuse you this opportunity. I shall indulge you just this once. Of course, the Duke of Moreland is going to be upset, so you had best allow me to go and speak with him about it. He was eager to marry you right away and I expect this is going to be quite a shock," he said.

"If he truly cares about me, he will be patient," Lydia replied, hoping that he would find someone else in the year that she had to prove herself.

Although surprised by the sacrifice her father was making, Lydia was relieved and extremely grateful that he understood how important this was to her. And he was correct, her mother would be extremely frustrated if he didn't allow Lydia the chance to prove herself as a writer. It was in her blood and she got this passion from her mother and grandmother. [They were the entire reason she was capable of this and it was important to Lydia that she make them proud.](#)

At last, she trusted that she would manage to do just that. She had one year. One year to become everything she had ever hoped to be. [\[5\]](#)

Chapter Two

Darius Frost was reluctant to get out of the coach at the home of Lord and Lady Seabrook. Nevertheless, he'd been offered a vast sum of money to tutor their spoilt young daughter and that was something he desperately needed.

If he was able to get the money for his family, he could certainly suffer through the indignity of working for an upper-class family like this one.

Darius had taught other students of a similar class and found each one of them to be shamefully arrogant. They looked down on him for his lack of status, thinking that [he was unworthy of their time and attention purely because he was not a member of society as they were.](#) [6] They only desired his intellect and his willingness to teach whatever he was ordered to teach. And as he got out of the coach and looked up at the grand townhouse before him, Darius sighed.

He made his way to the door and knocked. When the maid answered, she curtsied and led him into the townhouse.

"Lord Seabrook is in his study and I have been instructed to take you there," she said.

"I am sure of it," he replied, smiling despite the fact that he had no doubt this poor maid was ordered to and fro upon the whims of her master.

As he entered the study, Lord Seabrook stood from his desk and came over to greet Darius.

"Ah, Mr. Frost. Very nice to meet you," he said.

"And you, my lord," he replied with a bow.

"Please, have a seat. Miss Williams shall bring us tea," Lord Seabrook

said, glancing at the maid and curtsayed once more and left. Darius sat across from Lord Seabrook and waited to be asked the many questions he anticipated.

“Now, Mr. Frost, I have heard from Lord Campbell that you are a remarkable man of intellect. I have also heard that your skill with the written word is beyond what any other tutor might be expected to share with his students. Would you agree with this assessment?” he asked.

Darius understood that this was more than just a question, it was a challenge to see if he could answer with humility.

“My lord, I am perfectly capable of assisting your daughter with her needs. While I must say I have been spoken of with such high praise that I cannot condone, the truth is that I am at least able to assist your daughter in growing her skills and enabling her to achieve her greatest potential,” he said.

“Very well, that is precisely what I am seeking in a tutor. You see, she has a desire to be a published author. As you and I both are aware, that is highly unlikely for a young woman, but my daughter comes from a long line of women who defy the odds. In fact, her mother and grandmother were both published under the names of gentlemen,” he explained.

Darius was surprised by this, but he was quite intrigued. He’d never imagined that the family might actually have some talent. Still, he figured that Lady Seabrook and her mother had probably come from humble circumstances and been very fortunate to achieve what they had.

This young woman he was supposed to be tutoring was the daughter of Lord Seabrook, the man that was currently staring down his nose at Darius with curiosity and suspicion. It was obvious that Lord Seabrook did not view Darius as being a highly skilled tutor, but rather a young man who would be worth paying for indulging his daughter.

“That is quite remarkable that they were able to find success in their careers. I do hope that I shall be able to aid your daughter in following in their footsteps. Most young ladies must work very hard to accomplish this sort of task, but I do hope that she will be a diligent student,” he said, not expecting any such thing.

“Oh, I can assure you that my Lydia will be diligent. She wants this opportunity more than anything in all the world. I am rather in trouble with her suitor for allowing her this chance to prove herself, but while my daughter is very skilled and very determined, I know that it is highly unlikely she will ever make a career out of this,” he said with condescension.

“If you believe nothing will come of it, why are you indulging her?” Darius asked, instantly regretting the question. Who was he to question a lord like this? It was certainly not something a man of his station might be allowed to do.

Lord Seabrook raised an eyebrow in surprise as well and Darius was sure that he was about to be thrown out on the street for having dared to ask something so bold of this arrogant man.

“Well, I suppose I ought to be relieved that you at least know how to find your words in a situation. However, I do not expect such questions ever again,” he said.

“Indeed, my lord. Forgive me for asking anything of you. I understand that it was improper,” Darius said, grimacing internally at the idea that he was having to apologize for a mere question. How ridiculous that one man should be more important than another simply because of money!

Nevertheless, there was a long pause of silence and Darius waited. He still worried that he would be sent packing. The reality for Darius was knowing that he would have loved to leave the home at that instant, but he knew what a detriment that would be to his family. He could barely afford to support himself and ever since his brother, Alistair, had married and become a father, they were struggling even worse. Darius tried to send them money whenever he could.

The idea of losing this position before he even began it was too much to bear and Darius committed to keeping his mouth closed unless he was truly ready to say something of value.

“Now, I expect that we ought to simply move on and discuss the position,” Lord Seabrook finally said. Darius breathed a sigh of relief and smiled, waiting patiently to hear what would come of it.

“My daughter has been told by two publishers that her work is lacking the connection of the heart. They have said that the technicality of the

words is excellent, but there is not enough sentiment. I would like for you to help her with that skill," he continued.

"I see. That is a very important element to have in her work. If the author cannot be in tune with a piece of writing, the reader shall likewise be incapable. Much of it is also to do with the life experience of the writer," Darius stated, trying to hint at the very real fact that the daughter of a lord has probably experienced little heartache in life. It would take more than dreams of marrying a duke for anyone to truly connect to the heart of a character.

"Indeed, that seems to be one aspect with which she struggles. My daughter is currently being courted, of course, but she has never had the true experience of love and romance to be effective, as it happens," he said.

"Ah, I see. Although, I must add that it is more than mere romance that is required of human connection, my lord. There is depth to any relationship and it begins with the depth of character within the author," Darius clarified, hoping that Lord Seabrook wouldn't take it as undo criticism.

He seemed to consider it for a long moment. In that moment, Darius wanted little more than to shake the man and tell him that wealth and status and marriage were not the only things that made up a human. It appeared to him the Lord Seabrook didn't understand, but Darius knew it hardly mattered. In truth, he didn't need to get Lord Seabrook or even his daughter to understand. He just needed them to hire him long enough that he would be able to pay for a few things.

"May I ask what you intend to do if my work with your daughter does not lead to publishing?" he asked, realising that his reputation might be at stake if Lord Seabrook was unhappy with the outcome.

"So long as you do your utmost with my daughter and help her as best you can, there is nothing at all to worry about. I shall give you a good reference when you move on. As I stated, this position is for one year. I expect that you will make every effort to help her and I shall observe your skills as a tutor and how you interact with her as a teacher. In truth, I cannot hold you responsible for her ability to get a work published and I have no intention of doing so," he said, much to Darius's relief.

"Thank you, my lord. I am grateful for your understanding," he said.

“Mr. Frost, my daughter is very strong-willed,” Lord Seabrook said, leaning forward and putting his hands together. He looked at Darius with intensity and searching. “Are you quite sure that a young man such as yourself is up to the task of handling a noblewoman with dreams?”

Darius smiled politely, perfectly aware that this was yet another challenge. One to be handled with grace and delicacy.

Could he handle a noblewoman? Certainly. He had dealt with petty brats more often than he cared to remember. Was he eager to work with her? Certainly not. But would he do just about anything to receive the pay that had been promised to him?

Without question.

“My lord, your daughter shall have the confidence of complete control, but with my educated and devout steering. I assure you that there is nothing about which you ought to be concerned. She will soon be a great author and I can only hope that the publishers of London will see that,” Darius answered.

Lord Seabrook leaned back, pacified by this response.

“Very well,” he said. “You shall return tomorrow morning at ten o’clock, precisely. I fully expect you to handle my daughter with care and consideration. She is my darling little girl and she has a very big dream.”

“Yes, my lord. Of course,” Darius replied.

Lord Seabrook stood and Darius did the same, recognising that the conversation had come to an end. He would return the following day and begin his work as a tutor for an elite young woman with a fortunate and, if he was lucky, a modicum of skill that he might be able to work with.

Darius left the home with hope in his heart, determined that this would be the grand opportunity for which he had been waiting. At last, he would manage to help provide for his family as well as himself. Even more than his previous positions, in which he worked just as hard as he would now, but for men who had less of a fortune and could not pay him half so well.

It would be a long journey, Darius knew, before he was able to have the freedom he wished for in life. Truly, he would have loved the chance to use his abilities and his intellect to write as well, but whenever he imagined the chance, he had to accept that it was unlikely he would ever manage. To be the sort of man who had a career as an author took courage and strength, it took diligence and fortitude. And while he had those things in abundance, he understood that it also often required the right connections.

Although he'd caught a coach to arrive at the townhouse with a decent appearance, he could not afford to take a coach back home. Instead, he began to walk the streets of London. It took him nearly two hours to get home, living on the opposite side of the city. Although he would likely have to walk both ways most days, Darius was thankful that he would not have a position which would allow him the occasional journey by coach if necessary.

It was a striking difference, where the wealthy men lived versus where men like Darius resided. The clean, prim streets faded into rain-drenched alleyways and violent pubs. It appeared there was nowhere in London for a man to go if he was both decent and also poor. In general, the wealthy were given cleanliness, the poor were given dregs.

But a good man in London? He had no place in such a city. Indeed, there was nowhere he belonged and there was no one who would ever truly understand him.

Chapter Three

Lydia could scarcely believe that the day had finally arrived. Her tutor would be arriving at any moments, so she sat near the bottom of the stairs, fidgeting impatiently.

“You must listen to everything he tells you,” her father said.

“Of course, Papa. Why wouldn’t I?”

“I am quite serious, Lydia. Do not allow your pride or stubbornness ruin this chance. Remember that you begged me to hire someone who might be able to teach you. Well, now, I have done so. I expect you to treat him with all the dignity in the world and understand that he does, truly, know better than you do. While you are very attached to your work, you must be prepared for his criticism,” he said, continuing his walk down the hall before she could answer.

Lydia shrugged off her father’s warning. Of course this tutor would criticise her work! That was part of what he was being hired to do. It was necessary if she was going to grow in her skill. The last thing she wanted to do was risk letting her pride interfere with her dream. No matter what Mr. Frost had to say, she would be a diligent student. She would respect him and show an understanding of what it was he tried to teach her.

The moment she heard the sound of a coach approaching outside, Lydia jumped up from the step and rushed to look out the window near the door.

Immediately, her heart sank. What was the Duke of Moreland doing there? Why would he come and interfere with her on a day like this? Hadn’t he accepted that he was to wait until the end of her studies?

Just then, her father came rushing out from the study.

“Oh, dear, I forgot that I was supposed to meet the Duke at the club.

Your mother shall be home soon and the maid will be here as a chaperone. Enjoy your studies, Lydia!" he called to her before bolting out the door.

Lydia sighed in relief that she would not have to speak with the Duke. It was only ten minutes later that there was, at last, a knock at the door.

She rushed to answer before the maid could and when Lydia opened the door, she was immediately shocked.

There, before her, stood a man with short, nearly black hair. It was closely cropped, but she could still see that it would curl if he allowed it to grow. Clean shaven, tall, and well-groomed, he was quite a vision. But it was his amber-coloured eyes that truly struck her.

For a moment, Lydia stood, frozen. She almost didn't realise that he, too, was frozen in place upon seeing her. Once she did, however, a blush worked its way into Lydia's cheeks.

"Oh, you must come in," she said in a rush.

"Thank you, Miss...Miss Seabrook?" he asked, looking at her dress. Something cooled in his face, as though he was quickly uninterested in her identity whatsoever.

"Yes, I am Miss Seabrook," she replied. "You seem surprised."

"I am not accustomed to my students being the ones who answer the door," he said flatly.

"Certainly, I understand that is not quite normal. I, however, have been so excited about your arrival and the chance to improve my craft that I was waiting," she said.

"Excited? Perhaps a writer might be inclined to use the word *eager* instead," he told her.

Lydia stiffened with embarrassment. Although she wished she hadn't already managed to say the wrong thing, she reminded herself that this was why she had longed for a tutor. She was finding someone who would teach her what she needed to know about writing. He would help her to develop her skills and become the author she longed to be. There was no point in being embarrassed or offended.

“Have I offended you?” he asked without remorse.

“No, Mr. Frost. On the contrary, I was just thinking how fortunate I am to have a tutor with the willingness to correct me,” she said, hoping to cover for her wounded pride.

“That is a good attitude to have about it because, I assure you, there will be many times when I am forced to correct you. If you will be diligent to listen and learn, I expect there will be very little trouble for us, but I have yet to read your writing and that is when I am going to know for certain the extent to which I may help you,” he warned.

Lydia nodded, thinking him somewhat cold towards her. Although it was nice that he wasn’t making a fuss of her, she did realise just how different this man was from those of the ton. He seemed lacking in the friendly appeal that she would have otherwise hoped to find.

Before long, they were seated at the desk in the library on the first floor, the maid having just brought them tea and biscuits. Mr. Frost started to read some of her work and Lydia watched his expression with desperation. She wanted to know what he thought of her work and if it was any good.

Although she had spoken with publishers and they had given their thoughts, no one had ever truly worked with her like this before. Her mother had been an excellent writer in her youth, but chose to pursue her family rather than her work. Now, her mother said there was no chance she would be able to truly teach Lydia. She always said that it was simply something she would need to work on over time.

But this was it. Lydia had no more time after this. She would only be able to accomplish her dreams if Mr. Frost worked with her over the course of this year to turn her into the sort of author she longed to be.

At last, he put the pages down and sighed, looking up at her with curious eyes.

“Well?” she asked.

“It is surprising,” he said. “I did not expect you to understand composition so well. Your father told me that the publishers you spoke with mentioned your technical skill but lack of heart. I can see that in your work. Your writing is proficient, but it is not profound. A good

author must have both those things.”

Lydia took in the comment and wondered what that meant for her moving forward. If she was proficient, how could she now become profound?

“What will that take? How might I overcome it?” she asked.

“To begin with, we must read those authors who *are* profound. We must study their work and find how it shines next to yours. I trust that, through careful study of the masters, you will find what is lacking, but it is going to take much work. And, to be truthful, there is another aspect to connecting with your characters. One is understanding how to express human nature, which is what you will find through study. The other is simply understanding how the heart drives us,” he said.

“Are those two elements different?” she asked.

“The latter requires...empathy? That is not to say you have no empathy, of course. I do not know you well enough to make such a judgment. But even those who are empathetic and who can see humanity’s surface may not be able to push deep into the heart of a matter,” he warned.

Lydia chewed her lip, thinking she would never manage a task that sounded so vast. Was it possible that she might manage to accomplish this as she wished? Or would she come to find that she was utterly incapable? Was it possible that she had no chance at all at surviving this year with her own dignity and hope intact?

“We shall begin, as I said, through reading. Now, give me a moment to scan the walls here and find some favourites. Tells me, how is your collection organised?” Mr. Frost asked, searching the shelves.

“By era, then by surname,” she replied.

“Excellent. Here we are. Let me see, I shall take this volume by Mr. Franklin. Oh! I do love this work by Halmore. And I see here that you have a first printing of *The Walrus* by George M. Warner? That is, by far, one of the best worked I have read on the nature of humanity,” he said.

Lydia froze yet again and stared at Mr. Frost for a long moment. He

turned to her, smiling as he flipped through the book, and then looked up with discomfort.

“What is it? What have I said?” he asked.

“Were you told to say that to me?” she asked.

“I beg your pardon?”

“You must know who George M. Warner is. You would not have chosen that book so specifically otherwise,” she said.

“Forgive me, Miss Seabrook, but I have no idea what you are speaking of,” he said with genuine apology and confusion.

Lydia sighed.

“George M. Warner is the pen name of Georgette Marie Winston,” she said.

Mr. Frost scoffed and shook his head.

“I fear you are mistaken. Mr. Warner was a very well-renowned author,” he stated.

“Have you ever seen a portrait of him?” Lydia challenged.

“Well, no, of course not. He likely could not afford one,” he replied.

“And was he ever known to read in public?” she asked.

“How am I to know? He lived in the time of my grandfather. It was said that he died young,” Mr. Frost said.

“Indeed. His publisher made that statement. The truth is, Lady Winston was my grandmother. She excelled in her craft, just as my mother did in her youth,” Lydia said.

Mr. Frost appeared quite shocked. Lydia was pleased that she could share this information about her grandmother with someone who truly loved her work. It was also a relief to see that he did, indeed, respect the literature that came from her family. Perhaps his coldness might melt and he would show Lydia respect for her own piece as well.

“Well, if that is so, I expect we ought to try a different work. I should hate to spend time debating the positive and negative aspects of this book only to find it a personal challenge,” he said, putting the volume back in its place.

Lydia was disappointed. She’d hoped that this news might mean they could take a look at the work of her family and then get to know one another better through it. Instead, he took a copy of *White Mountain* by Herbert Collingridge, a book that Lydia had tried to read once upon a time but found so tedious that she’d moved on.

“Here we are. Now, this is the book we ought to begin with. I am sure that you will learn quite a bit from it,” he said.

“I fear that I never did finish it. Perhaps I shall try again,” Lydia said.

He grimaced and looked up at her with those amber eyes and Lydia saw that he was displeased by her response.

“Herbert Collingridge was an excellent author. How could you not finish his quintessential work?”

“To be truthful, I found it rather dull,” she confessed in a small voice.

“Dull?” he gasped. “Were you not moved by Anna’s devotion to her mother? Did you not grasp Jasper’s elegance and poetry as he pursued Olivia? Did you feel nothing when William learned that his father had been lost at sea?”

Lydia swallowed, feeling overwhelmed by his passion. But the fact of the matter remained. She had not been moved. Indeed, she had not gotten enough into the book for some of those things to take place.

“I stopped reading it after Anna’s mother confessed she’d had an affair with William’s father. I thought the romance of the past seemed forced, as though Collingridge used it as a catalyst to more important parts of the book but it had no real meaning of its own,” she told him.

Mr. Frost scoffed at her answer and shook his head, almost in anger. He was clearly a devoted lover of Collingridge’s work, but that did not mean Lydia had to be.

“I cannot believe you would feel so little. You only read a quarter of

the book. And it was far more than a mere catalyst! It was full of depth and emotion and longing. Did you feel none of that?" he asked.

Lydia sighed and her shoulders sagged. This was truly going to be an interesting experience if she was already disagreeing with her tutor. Nevertheless, she could not agree with his feelings. At last she answered him as honestly as she could.

"No," Lydia said. "I merely felt bored." [7]

Chapter Four

Darius wasn't sure what to make of his new student. As they spoke more about the work he'd placed before her, he realised that her boredom was not due to lack of depth, but rather a difference in expression. Miss Seabrook pulled out another volume that he knew well and she began to express why this was a superior work.

"When we see Catherine's loss played out in chapter forty-six, she is not a simpering, moaning child—as Anna's mother was in *White Mountain*—but she expresses her mourning with maturity. Her grief is not pitiful, it is...true. It is evident that she has lost more than just her family, but her very heart. You really thought that it was less of an honest work?" Miss Seabrook challenged him.

"I understand what you are saying, but I also believe that it is the interpretation of the reader. Because you connect so strongly with Catherine, you appreciate her experience more. Whereas you find Anna's mother to be tedious in her wishes for the past. That tells me that if you were to face grief, you would respond as Catherine," he explained.

"I should certainly hope so," she muttered.

"However, as an author, you must consider not only characters who are like you, but characters who are like your readers as well. You must have a whole person. Not just *your* person," he told her.

Darius saw Miss Seabrook thinking that over and considering his advice. For a moment, he realised with shock that he was actually enjoying this discussion. He found Miss Seabrook to be interesting and full of dialogue in her own right. Not only that, but she knew what made for a good tale. She simply had to be more well-rounded about telling one.

He also couldn't help noticing that she was beautiful, but that was the last thing Darius wanted to be distracted by. It would be a terrible

mistake if he allowed himself to get caught up in finding a noblewoman attractive, particularly when he detested the personalities of all these people like her.

It was true that she had surprised him with her depth even in the few hours they had been working together. She was not what he'd anticipated. She was not shallow or rude, she did not snub him or take offense when he disagreed with her. She was fierce with a debate, but not in a demanding way. In all, he was quite relieved and delighted to find that her company was not altogether unpleasant.

"Very well, Mr. Frost. How am I to go about learning more of my reader? How can I do what you've said and make a whole person rather than simply another version of myself?" she asked.

"Miss Seabrook, in the short time that I have known you, I can see that you are a woman with passion, a dream, and determination. You are also good at conversation and treat your inferiors well. But what of a villain? Could you write yourself as a villain?" he asked.

Her brows drew together in confusion and he waited.

"No?" he asked. "If not a villain, what about a fool? Could you write yourself as an utter fool?"

"Well...I suppose I could try those things," she said with a shrug.

"Very well. I think you must. If you write yourself as a villain and as a fool, perhaps you may understand how foolish it is to write the woman across the street as yourself. Or the sister of your heroine as yourself despite the heroine also being yourself," he said.

"Forgive me, but I should like to clarify. Are you saying that all my female characters are the same?" she asked with despondency.

"Every last one," he confirmed, flatly.

Miss Seabrook sighed with sadness and gave a slight nod.

"That is a shame. I should like for them all to be unique, to show their own behaviours and character," she said.

"Exactly. That is precisely what we want. But in order to make that happen, you must be very careful to ensure that you know what you

are doing. You see, you need to know more about human nature. You must know not only what your character does, but why. You must know two things, Miss Seabrook. Psychology and motivation,” he said.

“Oh, dear,” Miss Seabrook said.

“What is it?”

“I thought it would take at least a few weeks before I would be learning this much,” she said, looking tired.

“Is it too much?”

“No! Not at all! In fact, I have no desire to stop. It is just that I want to ensure that I grasp each concept well before moving on. So, please, explain what you mean,” she said.

“Look at Catherine here,” he said. “In this scene, she chooses to reject the earl. Can you tell me why?”

“Because she dislikes him,” Miss Seabrook said, coldly. Darius sensed there was something else behind her answer, but he knew that it was not the time to question her about it.

“And why does she dislike him?”

“Because he is arrogant,” she said in the same tone.

“Why does she dislike arrogant men?” he continued.

“Because *everyone* dislikes arrogant men,” Miss Seabrook hissed.

Darius paused, well aware that he had reached something less to do with the novel and more to do with her personal experience.

“While that is true, we must focus on the psychology and motivation of our character,” he said slowly, getting back to the pages. “Her father was arrogant and he abandoned her. Psychologically, she has been wounded by such men. Therefore, she is motivated to avoid them.”

Miss Seabrook nodded in understanding.

“Yes, I suppose that makes sense,” she said, softly.

Darius paused and gave her a moment to relax. He looked at Miss Seabrook and wondered more about her and why she was so determined to have the life of a writer rather than pursue marriage as most women of her station did. Clearly she despised arrogance, which was a shock to Darius, but he couldn't understand why she was so bitter.

He didn't want to push her emotions, but he also realised that this could be what her writing needed. Perhaps, if she was willing and able to put the effort into making them feel what she felt, she would actually be able to see some progress in them. Darius hoped that it would work, but questioned whether or not it was a good idea. After all, making her a better writer was the goal, but growing more personal and in-depth with a noblewoman was a terrible idea.

"But what about when she chooses to pursue her romantic interest in Lord Silverwood? Is that not a grave contradiction?" she asked with a sudden ferocity.

"L-Lord Silverwood?" Darius repeated, realising that she was absolutely correct.

"He was every bit as arrogant," she pointed out.

"But the book is more about her foolishness in choosing him than it is in her making a right decision," Darius said.

"I understand that, but it still comes as a contradiction to what you have just said about psychology and motivation. If those two things are so important and they are certainly present here, would it not be a flaw in the writer more so than the character? If he chose to have her reject the first man and then aggressively pursue the second when it is their shared character flaw she is meant to be avoiding, how can you say that it is her psychology and motivation to be with someone else?" she asked.

"Because it truly is her character flaw," he said.

"Then why was it not a flaw with the first man?" Miss Seabrook asked.

At last, Darius was somewhat cornered. She had found him in a place of true uncertainty, something no student had ever managed to do before. Suddenly, Darius felt quite foolish and uncomfortable. He'd

never before been challenged to this extent and he was quite embarrassed, hoping that he wouldn't allow her to see the extent of this weakness.

"Miss Seabrook, I suppose that is a very important thing to note. However, the flaw of a character goes beyond formula," he said, knowing that it was merely an excuse to get out of answering the contradiction he'd found himself in.

"I see," she said, looking at him with suspicion.

Darius had an awful feeling that he'd been caught. She saw his error, after all. And, although he was impressed by her observation and quickness, he didn't want her seeing more of him than he was willing to share. Not now. Not ever.

Truly, now more than ever, Darius understood just what a dangerous position he was in. He'd come to this home expecting a spoilt pupil like any other.

Instead, he'd found someone who was very much his equal.

Chapter Five

Lydia could hardly wait for Mr. Frost to arrive again the next day. She'd been completely thrilled by their conversation the day before and thought she would never again be so happy as she had been, debating literature and character and human nature.

Beyond the fact that Mr. Frost was incredibly handsome, he was also intelligent and striking. He seemed to be able to get her thinking in ways she'd never been allowed to think before. He encouraged her to look beyond what she saw and beyond what she was allowed. Indeed, he pushed her to look at the world from a perspective her father had never allowed.

The previous night, Lydia had stayed up, passionately working in her room to rewrite a scene from her novel. She incorporated as many ideas as she could from what Mr. Frost had suggested. Although she knew there was still much to improve upon, Lydia could already see that his input had made a difference and she was able to see a change. [8]

She imparted more emotion to her heroine, demonstrating a level of bitterness that Lydia did not share. The villain displayed a crassness that she was frightened to include, attempting a daring that she was unaccustomed to. And for the hero, Lydia stripped away some of the willingness to speak his emotions. She recognised that this was too feminine a quality to add to a strong, British gentleman.

Wondering if Mr. Frost would be happier with this, Lydia waited in the library, reading over it again and again, making any edits necessary by scratching out words and writing the better one atop it. By now, she had already rewritten the scene four times and was ashamed that he would see that she'd still had to make a number of edits. Nevertheless, Lydia appreciated that Mr. Frost would recognise her work and her efforts to present him with the best she had.

At last, Lydia stood and set down the ink pen, determined that she would make no more changes and she would hope that what she had written was acceptable to Mr. Frost. If it was not, she would have to accept that she was certainly going to need the full year of work before she would have any chance of being published. Otherwise, she would fail and be forced into that miserable marriage that she dreaded so much.

Just as her thoughts drifted to that idea, her father walked into the library and Lydia looked up at him and smiled. He came near to her with a grim expression on his face and Lydia was full of sudden dread, wondering what might be on his mind.

“My dear, I want to know how your studies are coming,” he said.

“Very well, Father. Yesterday was full of incredible conversations and Mr. Frost knows so much about writing and about humanity and characters and all the things that are so important for me to learn. I wish that I had been able to learn from him from a long time ago. I am sure that my writing is going to improve a great deal thanks to his efforts,” she said.

Lydia’s father sighed and he leaned against the fireplace and stared into it, looking at the remaining ash from the last time it had been full of flame. It was clear that he had something on his mind and that, more than likely, it was something Lydia was not going to want to hear. She hoped that he would simply let it go and not burden her with it, but Lydia had a terrible feeling that she would not be so fortunate as that.

“What is it, Father?” she dared to ask.

“I have to remind you again that this is just a temporary measure,” he said in a warning tone.

Lydia’s heart sunk and she looked down at her hands, her fingers fidgeting nervously to hear what he was going to say. More than likely, it had to do with the awful Duke. Was he unhappy? He had spent time with her father the day before and it seemed to Lydia that he was not going to cease in his pursuit of her. That was going to make things quite difficult if he would not leave her alone. All she wanted was to be happy and that was not a man who could give her any happiness.

“What do you mean by that, Father?” Lydia asked, willing him to explain.

“You know what I mean. This entire ordeal—this experiment with you having a chance to study and learn how to write better—it is...it is temporary,” he said, that same growling tone that held unhappiness or dissatisfaction or some other unpleasant emotion that Lydia truly did not want to hear.

“Where is this coming from? You said that I may have a year to entertain this opportunity. Has something changed? Did the Duke of Moreland say something to you, Father? I do not understand what I’ve done wrong,” Lydia said.

“We have an agreement, Lydia. That is all there is to it,” he said, strongly. “I do not wish for you to misunderstand the importance of this. If you fail, it is over. And if you do not fail, if by some chance a publisher is willing to take your work under another name, that does not necessarily mean you will have independence,” he warned.

Lydia’s heart sunk. She hated hearing those words. Her independence was so important to her. And now, her father seemed to be saying that she still might be stuck marrying the Duke even if she were to succeed in getting published.

“Why do you say that? I thought that I need only to prove myself and then I am free of the obligation to marrying the Duke,” she said.

“Lydia, no one is ever free of anything and the Duke clearly wishes to marry you. You must keep that in mind. He is persistent and just because you may get one book published, it does not mean you can afford to survive off that. Few authors manage to earn a proper income from their work and there is no promise that you are going to be an exception to that rule. You must not live in the shadow of your mother and grandmother,” he said.

Lydia’s eyes filled with tears of anger and pain. How could he say these things to her? Had she done nothing to prove herself thus far? Had she not worked hard? Had he not agreed to give her this chance?

“I am not living in their shadows, Father. I am doing everything I am capable of to create something of my own work. I wish to be the very best author that I am able to be. What is wrong with that? Can you not be happy for me? I learned so much even yesterday and I truly

believe that it has already made me better. To think that I have a whole year ahead of learning..." Lydia trailed off.

She wasn't sure what more to say in defense of herself. Why couldn't her father understand it? Why couldn't he see what she was capable of? Why could he not be proud of her?

"Enough, Lydia. You have heard what I needed to say and I hope that you take it into consideration because it is very important. You need to be aware of the fact that you are still new at all of this and there is much that would have to take place if you are ever to be successful. I know that you believe all it takes is the lessons you are getting from your tutor, but you will have to do more than just write a nice story in order to escape the expectations of society," he said.

"Society expects me to marry a man I dislike purely because he is wealthy. That is not a life that I want, Father. And you should not want that for me either. Why would I want to be so unhappy? Why would you want me to be unhappy?" she asked.

"I don't, Lydia. Of course I don't want that for you. But I do want you to be secure and I do not believe you have an adequate understanding of what it takes to have security. Your mother and I were very fortunate to have that, but it was not due to her writing or even the writing of her mother. It was the result of my father's station and his father's before that. Now, I am in the House of Lords and that means something in society. It means that I am able to arrange a match for my daughter that will give her all the wealth and power that London has to offer," he said.

"I care nothing for any of that," Lydia insisted.

"Ha!" he scoffed in frustration. "You sound just like a child. You have no idea how difficult life is for those who are not like us. They get nothing and that's all they will ever get. It is all they will ever be. Do you not realise how fortunate you are or how quickly you would lose it if you pursue this passion to the extent of refusing a duke? I have no desire to see you in that place," he said.

Lydia didn't know what to say. She was utterly heartbroken that her father was betraying her through these words. She couldn't imagine what had led him to this sudden outburst or why he was so determined to hold her back. It wasn't fair. She didn't want to go through this any longer but knew that, if she continued trying to push,

he would only yell and scream even more.

“Very well, Father. I understand that you are unsatisfied,” she said. “I will do what I can to make you proud. We have an agreement, as you have reminded me. I only hope that my success will prove to you that it was worth it to take the chance you have taken, that I am going to be the author that I dream of becoming.”

Lydia’s father continued to stare into the empty fireplace and she could tell that something was bothering him beyond her mere circumstance. Feeling that something must have happened to cause this outburst, Lydia decided to simply let it be and bear in mind her own hopes for the future, giving herself a chance to trust that everything would be all right in time.

If her father insisted on sharing his displeasure, she would have to listen, but it didn’t mean that she would have to accept it or relent and then subsequently fail.

No, instead she was more determined than ever. She was going to work hard. She would soon be published. Her father would be proud and the Duke of Moreland would never see her again.

Chapter Six

Darius could hardly believe what he had just heard. As he stood down the hall from the library, trying to ensure that he was not caught eavesdropping, he was stunned to learn that Miss Seabrook was nothing at all like he'd imagined.

Even after realising that she was not so shallow as he had first anticipated, he hadn't understood the extent of her passion for writing. Nor had he been aware of the reality that this was everything to her and it was even an escape from an arranged marriage that she wanted to avoid.

He suddenly felt a wave of empathy take over when he recognised that she was genuinely suffering under the pressure of her circumstances and that writing was the only thing that gave her any peace.

Darius wanted to support her in any way that he could, encouraging Miss Seabrook to write and become the success she dreamt of. He wanted to help her harness the qualities she was lacking and polish the qualities she already had. It was just a matter of enabling her to see the world a little bit more clearly and understand that there was more to the world than what she had lived and experienced.

When Darius heard Lord Seabrook huffing silently from the library, Darius darted into the nook under the stairs, hoping he would not be seen. After a moment, Lord Seabrook passed and, once the hall was clear, he made his way to the library. Upon entering, he saw Miss Seabrook on her own in the library with a book in hand, her eyes brimming with tears that she instantly suppressed upon his entrance.

"Miss Seabrook, how nice to see you again," he said, trying to give her a moment while preserving her dignity.

"And you as well," she replied with a gentle snuffle.

“Were you able to spend some time polishing your manuscript last evening or this morning? I know we spoke specifically about the third scene,” he said.

“Indeed, yes. I have been working on it quite a bit,” she replied, quickly shifting to excitement upon the discussion.

“Very well, I am eager to see what you have done,” Darius said, softened by his new knowledge.

“I cannot say that it is perfect yet, but I hope you are pleased. I know that I had a great deal of work to do on it and I can only hope that you are satisfied by my progress after a day,” she said.

“Well, it has only been a day,” he repeated with a kind laugh, hoping she would know that he didn’t expect a sudden masterpiece.

Darius took the pages of the manuscript in hand and began to read. It was only three pages long, but the scene had been dramatically shifted. He could see where work still needed to be done with the character development but noted a few areas in which Miss Seabrook had made dramatic shifts to expand changes in characters and distinguish them from one another.

“Ah, I appreciate the sarcasm here from Mary,” he said, impressed by her improvements in the characters. “The disdain she expresses when the villain compliments her adds such depth.”

“Truly?” she asked with delight. [10]

“Indeed, it is an excellent development. Now, you must keep it consistent. Certainly, you do not wish to make everything out of her mouth dripping with sarcasm, but now and then throughout the story, it would be wise. As she is not the main heroine, it will be easier to pace yourself with it. I expect that she is going to be a wonderful addition to provide the reader with some comic relief to such a bleak backdrop of a story,” he said.

“I hope it is not too bleak,” Miss Seabrook said with worry.

“Oh, heavens no. What I mean is that you are attempting to capture the nature of a life you know nothing about. You have never lived through the circumstances of life without wealth or a title and it is

difficult to [11] demonstrate characters who have lived this way when you never have. Although you have included some wonderful, light-hearted elements, that circumstance will still give your characters a bit of a grim existence,” he said, casually.

Darius looked up at Miss Seabrook and noted that she was eyeing him with curiosity.

“What is it?” he asked.

“I realised that you know much more about me than I know about you,” she said.

He chuckled and gave a polite shrug.

“I beg your pardon, Miss Seabrook, but your father has not hired me to tell you about myself. Indeed, I am sure he would be displeased if we were wasting the time you ought to be spending on writing by learning about your tutor,” he said.

“I disagree,” Miss Seabrook said with ease. “You have told me I need to learn more about people and circumstances unlike my own. Well, to my knowledge, you have no title. You do not live in a London townhouse. All I know about you is that you are intelligent and have tutored others before me. Please, do tell me more about yourself so that I can bring life into my characters.”

“You cannot base a character on me,” he said with discomfort and a bit of anxiety.

“I never claimed that I would. Only, I know nothing at all about you. Have you any family?” she asked.

“Why does it interest you?”

“Because I want characters that have all the elements you have spoken of. How did you get your education? What work does your father do? Will you ever publish a book of your own?” she asked.

Darius paused, not liking that she was suddenly trying to use him for inspiration. He knew that it would not lead anywhere good if she did. She would only find bitterness and frustration. She would learn that his father had worked for nobility and was relieved of his duties merely for being more intelligent than his superiors who were

embarrassed they did not know as much. She would learn that Darius had often taught children of nobility whom he detested. She would learn about his brother's starving family and how most of Darius's wages would go to his nieces and nephew.

Darius did not wish to share any of those things with her. He wanted her to simply learn how to write. Nothing else mattered, did it? Certainly not his life. She did not need to know about any of that.

"Have you asked these questions of Fitzwilliam?" Darius asked, thinking it the only logical avenue to follow.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Fitzwilliam. He is the hero of the tale, correct? The man who comes to Mary's rescue? I am gathering only from what little I have read of your work. You told me that it is not a love story exclusively, but I know that it has some aspects of that," he said.

"Yes," she replied. "Fitzwilliam is the hero."

"He is not a nobleman," Darius pointed out. "You ought to ask him the same questions you have just asked of me. It would be an excellent way of learning more about your characters. [12] And when you walk down the street and observe a woman selling flowers or bread, a child begging, even your coachman pulling on the reins, ask them. Write down the questions you have for them and then answer them with your own assumptions," he said.

"My own assumptions?"

"Yes. You can answer your questions and turn them into characters. It is a strategy authors have used from the moment we began to write fiction," he said.

"I have never thought to do something like that," Miss Seabrook confessed.

"Well, now you have no excuse. You must try it. I assure you that you are going to find yourself shocked by the answers you come up with. It is a very good way of learning who your characters are and also who you are," he said.

Although Darius was still trying to push Miss Seabrook to the best of his ability, he could not get the conversation he'd heard out of his mind. It was so surprising to learn how trapped she was and that she just wanted to escape the life she'd been forced into. He wondered if her father would ever relent and allow her to live the peaceful life she wanted.

More than likely, he would not. Darius understood the way of society and that a long woman who was beautiful, wealthy, and from a noble family would have no choice but to live within the confines of what society anticipated of her. Even her own father could not allow her to be free and happy as she wished.

Darius was beginning to wonder more about her mother and grandmother[13]. Did they give up writing for family? Were they grieved when they had to do this? Was it possible that Miss Seabrook could have both? Or was the problem that she wanted only one? That she wished to write and not be married?

He had met women like that before, those who had ambition and did not wish to find love. They were few and far in between. But Miss Seabrook was different from them. She had more heart, more compassion. She seemed like she would be an ideal wife, but she also had skill that might send her longing for something else.

Moment by moment, Darius was realising that his initial judgments of Miss Seabrook were quite wrong. She was not the shallow, spoilt girl he had expected. She was a woman with dreams and talents and depth. She was kind and curious. Even to a fault.

"I will be very diligent to do as you have said. In fact, I am eager to try answering those questions," she said with a laugh.

"Well, since you cannot very well go for a walk at the moment, I want you to read this," Darius said, pulling out another volume she hadn't yet read. Miss Seabrook read the first three pages and then Darius took the book from her.

"What questions do you have for Henry?" he asked. "Write them all down."

Miss Seabrook did as instructed, writing questions she had for the character based on the three pages she had read. Darius took the

paper and read a few of the questions but didn't bother going down the whole list.

"Excellent. Now, I want you to answer them. You know nothing more of the story so your view cannot be polluted by it. I want you to be the one to tell me what happens next. Tell me who Henry is. What sort of man? What is his family like? Is he good or bad? Selfish or kind? Tell me everything you can about his story and then I will have you write a scene with him," Darius said.

As Miss Seabrook did her work, Darius picked up her own pages once more, enjoying her revisions and seeing the care and consideration she had put into each and every word. Indeed, she was an excellent student and a surprise altogether. Darius was even beginning to wonder if he had found a noblewoman who was truly a decent person, someone unlike any other titled member of society he had ever met before.

[Was it possible? \[14\]](#)She seemed so genuine and decent.

Never had he expected this, but he had also never been more happy to be wrong. In fact, if Miss Seabrook was what she seemed, Darius was starting to think that everything he had ever believed about human nature might be wrong. Perhaps character was not determined by circumstance. [Perhaps it was possible to have too much pride even if a man was poor and to have decency even if a woman was rich.\[15\]](#)

And when Miss Seabrook looked up at him and smiled with those striking hazel eyes of hers, he imagined that she was going to change everything.

Chapter Seven

The lessons continued for the next two days and Lydia was surprised by how quickly she and Mr. Frost were getting comfortable with one another. Although she had been rather intimidated by him at first, she was quickly growing to show more of her passion and express more of her thoughts and opinions on different works.

It had been strange as well to watch his coldness melt. At first he had been so stiff around her, so flat in his tone and behaviour. But now, he was willing to laugh, willing to smile, willing to show a bit of warmth which Lydia found extremely lovely. He had such a handsome face that, at times, she caught herself eyeing him and studying his features. She had begun imagining her heroic characters with amber eyes and dark hair. And when she would read of a character from another book he would give her, she would impose Mr. Frost's face within the pages.

Truly, she hadn't expected any of this, but Lydia was still grateful. Even though she was struggling to accept the full terms of her arrangement with her father, she was glad that she had at least been given the opportunity to work with Mr. Frost. She was grateful to be learning so much from him, even if she felt that the clock was constantly ticking away their time together and it would run out before she knew it.

The stories they were reading were full of details and characters that Lydia had never considered. She was coming to understand why Mr. Frost was so insistent about certain aspects of the storytelling as well as certain aspects of the characters. Instead of learning simply about basic and technical matters, he was teaching her about life. And that was something she had never anticipated.

"Miss Seabrook," he said, showing her another volume, "I wanted you to have a look at this work by—"

"John Tuttle," she replied.

“Yes. You know him? You have read this?” he asked.

“It is among my favourite works. I have read everything Mr. Tuttle wrote. He is a master,” she replied.

Mr. Frost smiled and eyed her for a long moment until Lydia began to blush. At that, he looked away and set the book in front of her.

“He is my favourite author by far,” Mr. Frost said. “I first read him as a boy. Well, it was father who actually read his work to me. I do believe that Mr. Tuttle’s work was how I learned to read to begin with. It was very challenging not only through his use of language, but also to understand the way of the world.”

“Indeed, he shows such depth,” Lydia replied.

“I though that, perhaps, we might read through this entire novel together. Although you have already read it once, would you mind if we analyse each page with one another?” he asked.

“I would be delighted,” Lydia said. “In fact, I have not read the book once, but three times.”

At that, she laughed and Mr. Frost did as well, smiling at her again. It was clear that they had very similar taste in general and there were only a few books they disagreed on. It was a relief to Lydia that she’d found a tutor who wanted her to read many of the things she was already excited by. She was glad to know that her father was allowing this and even more thankful that he had not come to her again about the circumstances of the arrangement.

For now, all Lydia wanted was to enjoy her time with Mr. Frost, learning and working together to create a book that was better than anything she’d ever imagined she could write.

As they read through the first fifteen pages of Mr. Tuttle’s work, Lydia continually glanced up at Mr. Frost, noting the way his thick, dark eyelashes settled around his eyes. She noticed the small dimple in his chin, the fact that he had apparently failed to shave that morning. And then she would return her gaze to the page before her and focus, ensuring that she did not miss anything important.

Afterwards, they returned their attention to Lydia’s work.

“I admire your passion for writing and for the work you have done. I want to know what it is that you wish to truly say through it. What is your intention? Why have you chosen this piece? These characters? This plot?” he asked her.

Lydia paused, trying to consider the nature of her work. Truly, she wondered that herself sometimes. What was she trying to say? What was her goal?[16]

She had begun with a story. But that story was quickly spiraling, focusing more on the layers and depth of the characters. Lydia had never cared more about her characters than the story and that had certainly been her struggle in the past. Her entire method was changing.

“I suppose I spent so much time wanting to write because my dream was to be a writer. But you have exposed something else to me,” she said.

“Oh?”

“You have shown me that I want to write because I believe that I have a message worth sharing,” she answered.

Mr. Frost smiled, clearly satisfied by her response.

“Would you care to share what that message is? I am eager to know,” he said.

“Well, I suppose my message is that we are not defined by our circumstances and any man or woman can be whomever they wish. No matter how trapped they might feel, no matter how much they view themselves the victim, they are not stuck in the past if they choose not to be,” she said.

Once more, Lydia felt that she had surprised Mr. Frost. He appeared to be at a loss for words, something which she couldn't help but feel proud of. In many ways, she was starting to think that he thought of her less as a pupil and more as a fellow person. Day by day.

That afternoon, Lydia was grieved when Mr. Frost had to leave, but she knew that there was plenty more work for her to focus on before the next day's lesson. She needed to fix a few pages in her manuscript

before Mr. Frost reviewed them. Unfortunately, when her father called her, she had a terrible feeling that something else was going to happen that would take her away from her plans.

“Father?” she called, following his voice to the study. When she entered, Lydia was distraught to find the Duke of Moreland there as well.

He looked Lydia up and down with rakish eyes, telling her that he believed her to be his property. It was dreadful, having to see him now that Mr. Frost was gone. Why was her father indulging the Duke so much and allowing him to wander the home or be there at all? He was such an awful man!

“Lydia, the Duke of Moreland and I are going to the club soon and your mother shall be home quickly. However, the Duke wished to speak with you a moment. I shall just be outside,” her father said, quickly taking his leave, allowing the two of them to be unchaperoned with the door open.

“Miss Seabrook, how lovely to see you again,” the Duke said.

“Yes, and you as well,” she replied flatly, curtsying to try and be polite.

“I have missed you since our previous meeting. I know that you have asked your father to indulge this little dream of yours that you might become an author, but I do hope you are not forgetting the importance of marriage and society. A woman cannot be an author and I urge you to bear that in mind,” he said.

“I beg your pardon?” she asked in offense.

“My future wife is dallying about, trying to publish a book when she ought to be preparing for motherhood. I do not expect much more of this from you and I hope you quickly recover from these selfish notions,” he said.

“I never agreed to marry you, Your Grace,” Lydia reminded him. “Moreover, a woman is capable of being a writer just as she is also capable of being a mother. The two may be done together, even.”

“That would be far too much stress on the children. It is nonsense. You should not be allowed to entertain such foolishness. You needn’t

worry, I shall speak with your father and get all of this ended sooner rather than later. If I'm to marry you, I should be wise to take control over this paltry attempt at independence," he said.

Lydia could not believe what she was hearing. How could he say these things to her? Why was he being such a dreadful man? [Did he know nothing of what it was to be a woman and have her life pulled to and fro by whomever wished?](#)[17]

Lydia was shocked and angry, wanting nothing more than to send him out the front door. But she knew that her father would never forgive her. Nevertheless, it was a relief when her father returned and smiled, nodding to the Duke.

"Shall we depart?" he asked.

"Oh, yes, of course," the Duke said. "Thank you for the chance to speak with Miss Seabrook. She is lovely as ever."

With that, the Duke of Moreland and Lydia's father departed. Neither gave her a farewell. They simply spoke about her rather than to her. It was horrifying and she wished that she could beg her father to stay away from that man if he was going to be so discouraging about her hopes for the future.

It was not long before Lydia's mother came home and when Lydia saw her enter the drawing room, it was as though a weight was lifted.

"Mother," she sighed in relief.

"Lydia? What is it?"

"The Duke of Moreland was here," she answered.

"Oh, darling, I am so sorry. I meant to speak with you this morning but you were already in your lesson before I departed for tea with Lady Applewood. However, your father told me that the Duke is very displeased with this whole arrangement and wishes for your father to end it quickly. I have convinced him to allow you to continue for now, but I know that he is struggling," she said.

"But why, Mother?"

"Because he is a man of society, Lydia. It is pride. No man wishes to

admit that his daughter might miss out on an important marriage simply because she has dreams contrary to what is acceptable,” her mother said.

It was certainly logical and Lydia understood the truth in her mother’s words, but it did not make matters any easier. She still wished that things could be different, that her life could be different. She wondered why it was all so complicated and why her father could not see the importance of giving her the independence she sought.

Nor could she imagine a life with the Duke of Moreland. Now that she had spent so much time with Mr. Frost, he was the only man Lydia found herself intrigued by. He was the one who made her happy. he was the one who made her light up.

No one else had ever done that and she was certain that no one could.

If anything, she wanted to escape the Duke of Moreland. but if she could continue getting to know Mr. Frost not as a tutor, but as a man? That was a dream that was just beginning to take root in Lydia’s heart and it frightened her very much to think that she could like him so much after such a short time of knowing one another.

Was it possible that she could feel this way about a man? And what would her father say if he learned that her feelings were for a man who was outside of the ton? Would he ever forgive her?

Lydia took a deep breath, knowing that nothing had ever been so complicated in her life. This was all so new to her and it was supposed to simply be about writing a book.

Instead, as he was quickly coming to learn, Lydia was starting to understand that life was a good deal more complex than mere words on a page.

Chapter Eight

Darius was sitting with Alistair and his wife at the small, wooden table. The tenement was rundown and there was an unpleasant odour coming through the windows, but Darius scarcely noticed it anymore. Instead, he was distracted by the joy of having little Celia in his arms and watching Mary and Thomas play together on the floor.

“So, how is this new position then? I am still shocked you would give us such a handsome portion of your salary,” Alistair said.

“You know that my entire intention in getting this work is so that I might be able to help my family,” Darius said.

“But you are just my brother,” Alistair said. “You are not Father. It is not your job to provide, it is mine. Elizabeth has been so patient with me.”

At that, Alistair took his wife’s hand and she smiled lovingly at him. Darius looked away, not wanting to intrude on their private moment.

“Truly, Darius, what about you? Surely you cannot afford the home you are renting from that awful landlord,” Alistair said.

“He is not all that bad. And the apartments are decent. I am fortunate to have rented them for a decent price and I am able to make my wages stretch rather far,” he disputed.

“But how?” Alistair asked.

“One way I am fortunate is that the maid always sends me with food when I leave the estate. She told me once that the master likely expects it but that I should not flaunt it. I have yet to refuse. That is five meals each week that I am fed. And while I do not get the prime cuts of meat, she makes quality fare and I am grateful for it,” Darius explained.

“Well, that is grand, I suppose,” Alistair said.

“Perhaps next time she gives me biscuits, I will be able to bring them here for the children. I would love to give them a treat,” Darius said.

He thought about the circumstances of his brother’s life and how much Darius longed to have something similar. He didn’t need a nice place to live or even fine food. He just wanted a family like Alistair had. He wanted sweet children like the infant in his arms. He wanted a kind wife like Elizabeth.

It was difficult for them to get by. Alistair had struggled to find work ever since his hand was crushed in an accident when he had been a coachman. Now, he did what he could to support the family, but it was also Elizabeth’s work of baking bread that kept them in their home. Without that, they might not be able to afford a place to live at all. And, unfortunately, they had come to discover that so much of her pay from the bread went back into ingredients, they they were left with little else.

“Darius, we are so thankful for all that you have done for us, but we still must urge you to get back to taking care of yourself. We will be all right,” Alistair said. Elizabeth nodded enthusiastically and Darius knew they were trying to encourage him, while also being extremely selfless.

He thought about this as he made his way back to his home, wondering what life would be like for them if he was unable to help support them. Would they be out on the street? Would he be able to bring them into his close quarters with all three of their children?

It would be too much. He knew that. Still, Darius would have done whatever it might take to ensure that they did not end up on the street. And if, for now, that meant teaching a lovely young woman how to write, that was certainly fine by him. Indeed, Darius was starting to think that he had managed to find the most wonderful job in all of London.

“Your characters must be more convincing than this,” Darius said when he read an older draft of one chapter. Miss Seabrook nodded, but he could see that she was discouraged.

“And what can I do to help? Is it the tone? The gestures? What am I missing?” she asked.

He considered it for a moment before an idea popped into his mind.

“Here we are,” Darius said. “Come, stand by the fireplace with me.”

Miss Seabrook followed him and they stood there together, across from one another.

Darius set the pages of the manuscript on the ledge over the fireplace and looked at her.

“I cannot imagine my life without you by my side,” Darius said.

Miss Seabrook looked at him in shock.

“Anne,” he said, calling her by the name of her heroine. “Anne, I need you by my side.”

At that, Miss Seabrook laughed, understanding the exercise.

“Henry, our life together would be fraught with pain and confusion. What do you mean by telling me that we must be together?” she asked, playing along with a grin.

“I mean that there is nothing in the world that matters so much to me as being with you. Surely you know that I am nothing without you,” he said.

“Nothing without me? You are the very thing that makes me who I am,” Miss Seabrook said with intensity. She looked at Darius and he stared back into her eyes. For a moment, he was lost to the characters, lost to the chance to tell her that she was everything to him as well.

And that was a terrifying notion to Darius.

“I cannot make you who you are. It is the woman that you have always been, that is the reason I care for you,” he said, pushing himself back into the role and ensuring that he was not making the mistake of saying anything he truly meant. Of course, the lines are beginning to blur and that was difficult for him to admit.

She seemed at a loss for how to reply and Darius was frightened by

the path of the conversation, so he quickly changed his tactic.

“What if we keep it somewhat more lighthearted? I understand that was a scene that is a great deal more intense. Perhaps we may discuss something small?” he suggested.

“I would like that,” she replied in evident relief.

“Very well,” he said. “Anne, you must tell me about your family.”

With that, Miss Seabrook went on to share about the family of her heroine, even going into detail about an uncle who sailed as an admiral and lost a leg at sea. Meanwhile, under the guise of Henry, Darius shared about his own stories of woe, careful not to tell Miss Seabrook anything true about himself. He wanted to maintain everything in good fun and for the sake of her writing rather than getting too close to one another.

By the end of the lesson, Darius was overcome by how much he enjoyed being with her. It was so easy to flow in and out of conversations, not only as characters, but as themselves as well. He could be genuine and honest with her in a way that he was unable to be with the majority of people.

He was more comfortable with her now and found her shockingly captivating. All of that was something Darius hadn't planned, but he was thankful for it. Now, more than ever, he was beginning to grow cautious. He recognised that some of their conversations were drifting upon personal details that would likely anger her father.

Knowing that he needed to keep things based on the work they were doing, he consistently tried to return their topics to writing and writers, hoping they could continue bonding over those things without crossing any lines.

“Tell me more about your grandmother,” he said.

“She was incredible. Of course, as you said, she died very young. I was only two years of age when it happened, so I remember nothing. But my mother has told me many stories about her. She was so persistent. She wanted to write so badly that she began sneaking out at night and leaving manuscripts at the door of publishers with a note asking them to read it and then leave a note of response,” Miss Seabrook said with a laugh.

“So she did not communicate face to face?” he asked.

“Not until she received an acceptance. It was the third publisher she approached. They left a note for her, addressed to the pen name she used. And they accepted, so she left another note asking when she might come by and speak in person. She asked that it be a time when they were otherwise not busy,” Miss Seabrook continued.

“At last, they met her and were shocked, but she told them they could not very well back out now. She had the letters confirming they wished to publish her work and she threatened to share the letters if they tried to back out. She would shame them. They agreed to move forward and she was thrilled.”

“That takes an awful lot of courage to do what she did,” Darius noted.

“She was always known for her courage. I admire her so much even though I never got to meet her,” Miss Seabrook said with sadness in her gaze.

Darius could see similarities in her work and that of her grandmother. He was amazed and wondered how he could have missed recognising the work of her grandmother as being that of a woman. There was such tenderness in it, something beyond what he had read accomplished by any man before.

And now, here he was, teaching the granddaughter of such a master. George M. Warner. A true gem of an author.

“And tell me about your mother,” he said.

“Her? Well, she was following in her mother’s footsteps. A true master at her craft. She published two novels before her father told her she had to choose,” Miss Seabrook explained.

“And she chose marriage?”

“Yes. She loves my father and she longed to be a mother. My father told her that she could continue her work since it was under a false name, but she gave it up when she fell pregnant. She was very sick during that time and once I was born, she no longer wished to write. She said that all she wanted was to be a mother,” she said.

“Your mother gave it up because you were more important,” he said.

“I suppose it was just what she wanted. Her mother continued with her work and was still a remarkable wife and mother. But my own mother had little desire to write once I was born. She felt that it was no longer important,” Miss Seabrook said.

Darius thought about his own mother. He missed her a great deal. She had been a bright, sweet woman. But it was all such a long time ago and he no longer had her in his life. He was grateful to still have Alistair and Elizabeth, but it was nice to hear that Lady Seabrook was such a warm, loving mother. Such a thing was far too rare and Darius couldn't imagine what Miss Seabrook would do without the support of her mother to temper her father.

“May I ask you something?” he began.

“Yes, of course,” she replied.

“Is it true that you have only a year? What happens at the end of that?” he asked.

Miss Seabrook grew sad and looked at him with those hazel eyes of hers.

“If I am not able to get published, I have only one choice. I am doomed to a life I could never wish for myself,” she said.

“And there is no way out?”

“Aside from this? No. None at all,” she told him.

Darius took a deep breath and released it with a nod.

“Very well, then,” he said. “It seems we have a bit more work to do.”

Chapter Nine

Lydia was captivated by Mr. Frost. Halfway through their second week together, she was still struck by his skill as a dramatic actor whenever they portrayed one of her scenes or made any effort to get to know her characters better.

Little by little, Lydia found that her characters were conforming. Her hero was growing to be more like Mr. Frost. Her heroine was having a more developed personality. And the other characters were becoming whole people, heroes of their own stories. It was all, truly, working. Her writing was getting better and she had only been working on it for a short time. She was grateful for Mr. Frost and the chance she had been able to indulge.

But Lydia was also getting more and more frightened by the day. Not only was her father getting closer to the Duke of Moreland, but Lydia was getting closer to her tutor.

As she started to care for Mr. Frost, she wondered what would happen if anything ever grew between them. Surely her father would be furious. But what could he possibly do? There was no chance he would be able to ruin things between them. Then again, he would also never allow it to be anything more than it was. Lydia was terrified that she would get caught staring at Mr. Frost, that she might accidentally say the wrong thing about him and her father would send him away.

There was so much she needed to worry about and Lydia couldn't be sure if she was really in a good position to have the life she wanted so badly. More than anything, she tried to focus on the writing, but her attention was slipping. Each day, she thought more about Mr. Frost and what it would be like if only he were the one she was meant to marry.

The Duke of Moreland was such a rake and a selfish, arrogant caricature of a man. He was everything Lydia disliked in a person, and

yet he was the one she was meant to fall in love with. How could anyone expect that from her? How could her father think that she ought to marry someone she detested so dramatically?

Her mother didn't seem to notice either. Certainly, her mother supported the dream of writing but it appeared to Lydia that no one else could see what an awful man the Duke was. Nor could they see that Mr. Frost was not simply a tutor or a man outside of the ton, he was a gentleman in every sense of the word.

In truth, Lydia knew that she would not mind at all if she were betrothed to him.

As she finished her work one morning in preparation for Mr. Frost to come, Lydia decided to walk the garden in the back of the townhouse. She enjoyed getting fresh air in the mornings and it was an ideal spot for just that.

As she walked and breathed in the scent of the roses and the hydrangeas, Lydia wondered when she would have the clarity she needed for the future. When would she be able to convince her father what was best for her and when would he understand that she was on a path to fulfilling her dreams?

As if by magic, he suddenly appeared outside near her and Lydia turned to him.

"Father, how wonderful to see you," she said.

"Yes, Lydia, I wanted to speak to you about something," he said. Just as before, Lydia had a sense of dread, aware that this was not going to be a conversation that she would enjoy.

"What is it? You look as though you have some terrible news and I am not sure that I can bear it, Father," she warned.

"Bear it you must," he replied with a sigh. "I know that you are unhappy with me at the moment and that you feel I am being inconsistent with you, but I need you to heed my warning."

"About what?"

"About the Duke of Moreland," he said.

“What is it now?” Lydia asked with frustration.

Her father’s expression was very grim and Lydia felt that he was going to be furious at her if she was not patient.

“He is desperately unhappy about our arrangement. He expresses to me nearly each and every day how much he longes to marry you right away. It is cruel that you are making him wait when it is obvious that he is in love with you. I am not sure if this was such a good idea, Lydia. I wish that I had never agreed to this,” he said.

Lydia’s heart shattered at those words. She knew that her father would not force her to do anything and she knew that he feared how her mother would respond if he tried, but it was clear that he was genuinely considering what it might be like to go back on what they had agreed. Lydia was frightened by the prospect, frightened that he would tell her she no longer was allowed to continue learning from Mr. Frost. Or he might say she now only had six months, or that she must do it on her own.

She realised that she had grown so attached to these lessons and her time with Mr. Frost that she simply could not do without them. If her father tried to take them away from her, Lydia thought for certain that she would fall apart. Did he not understand the importance of all of this? Did he not know what it meant to her? Why would he even bring this up now?

“What has the Duke of Moreland said?” Lydia asked, sure that he was the one behind all of this and it was his fault that her father was speaking this way.

“My dear, you need not worry about him. He is the one who is worried. He fears that you are not taking this seriously, that you will miss out on very good things in life and, in truth, I cannot disagree with him,” he said.

“Father, I do not understand. Two weeks ago, you were in support of this. You understood how desperate I was, how much I want this. Why would you now be trying to go back on your promise? Why would you refuse me this happiness when you have already assured me that I am allowed to have it?” she asked.

“Because I have taken the time to reconsider it and I see that I made a very grave error, Lydia. I am taking away a chance, not offering you

one,” he said.

“What do you mean by that? You think this is a waste?” she asked, hurt by the fact that her father already viewed her as a failure. The last thing Lydia wanted was to acknowledge that she was not good enough to succeed even with all the work and effort she was putting into the pages.

“I am telling you that you have two opportunities, Lydia. You have an opportunity to become a writer and an opportunity to become a duchess. It is clear which one you must choose. I fear that, if you do not marry the Duke now, he is going to find someone else and you will have missed out on the greatest opportunity of your life—all for some silly dream that is never going to amount to anything,” he said.

Lydia was silent. She could not believe that her father would be so condescending. He had never spoken to her like that, never treated her with such disdain or lack of faith. He had always tried to be supportive, even when he disagreed with her.

But this? This was not like him. It was very much like the Duke of Moreland, in Lydia’s mind, but not like her father.

She still feared that he might strip away their agreement, but Lydia held to the hope that her mother would run to her defense. There was no chance that her father would refuse her mother on something like this, not when her mother had been so successful in this same industry. That was simply not a risk he would take.

But it was evident that he would try to talk Lydia into giving it up on her own.

“You could be damaging your entire future, Lydia. Do you realise that? If he finds another wife, who will have you? What if you never publish a single book? Or what if you publish only one and no one purchases it? What will you do? Are you simply going to give up? Will you live here with your mother and I as a spinster with nothing else to support you? I cannot bear to see you throw away everything you have just for a foolish dream,” he said.

Lydia bit her lip, hard, trying to suppress her tears. She couldn’t bear it for another moment. She couldn’t imagine why he was being so cruel. But more than ever, Lydia knew she could never marry the Duke of Moreland. If he was turning her father against her in this way,

it was only further evidence that he was not to be trusted, that he was an appalling creature who just wanted to use and manipulate the world for his own good.

“Father, I will not give this up,” she insisted.

“You must!” he hissed. “I cannot take it away from you, but I can help you see reason, help you see that this is all a mistake and you are going to suffer the consequences. I can’t let you live in regret, Lydia. But that is exactly what you will have if you cannot wake up and understand what you have gotten yourself into. This is wrong.”

“This is exactly what I am meant to be doing,” Lydia said.

She couldn’t bear it another moment. The idea of standing there while her father shifted his entire perspective, while he was being turned against her, it was too dreadful and she wouldn’t hear another word of it. She wouldn’t succumb to the pain.

With that, Lydia rushed past her father and back inside the the home. Rather than going straight to the library as she knew she ought to do, she fled to her bedroom for a moment, needing the privacy to weep in freedom.

Mr. Frost would be there soon and she didn’t want him to see her like this. She’d suffered enough embarrassment for the time being and it was unbearable to think that she was about to suffer any more of it. And if her father persisted, if the Duke of Moreland continued trying to force her hand, Lydia had a feeling there was much still to come.

Chapter Ten

Darius sat in the library, patiently waiting. He wanted to give Miss Seabrook as long as she needed. He could hardly believe what he had just overheard and was already growing weary of Lord Seabrook and his attempts to convince her to give up her dreams.

Darius was beginning to wonder if everyone in her life was at odds with this chance she was taking. She had told him that her mother supported it but that her mother also thought marriage and family was more important and it could be in her best interest to pursue those things first.

But this? What was she meant to do when her father simply could not understand the importance of her pursuit of writing? Was she going to be trapped forever? And was there anything at all that Darius could do to help?

Certainly he did not wish to lose his position and there was an element of the matter that was for his own sake, but he was surprised by how moved he was to try and aid Miss Seabrook more than anything else. He was desperate to help her find happiness and get free of the utter nonsense she was living under.

Once he heard her footsteps approaching, Darius took a deep breath and tried to prepare himself to be as gentle and kind as he possibly could.

Miss Seabrook entered, still on the verge of tears, but she had managed to get herself together quite nicely and he was impressed by how beautiful she looked even with bloodshot eyes. In fact, it only added an element of charm, he thought.

“Miss Seabrook, are you all right?” he asked calmly, trying to comfort her.

But it seemed that it was this realisation, knowing that Darius had

overheard the conversation, that broke Miss Seabrook. She began to cry, falling into the chair by the fireplace and burying her face in her hands.

Darius sat beside her, just out of reach. He knew it would not be proper to pat her on the back or sweetly touch her shoulder. He understood the dangers of getting too close to her. But he was moved nonetheless and it took all his strength to stop himself.

"I am so sorry, Miss Seabrook," he said.

She didn't look at him, but stood and went to stand by the window, swiping at the tears to rid them from her face.

Darius followed her and they looked out over the garden. Lord Seabrook was no longer there. No one was. It was simply the beautiful flowers and the greenery and the gifts that come with a nice yard for the wealthy. He looked out over it with wonder.

Miss Seabrook could still barely contain herself and, at last, Darius was the one to break. He couldn't watch her suffer without trying to comfort her. He took her hand in his, aware that they would not be seen and if anyone entered the library, he could drop her hand before it was noticed. They were tucked neatly into the corner and had nothing to fear.

"You must know that you are very talented, that you should not waste it. I know that many people will not understand, particularly given your position in society, but that is no reason to give up," he said, trying to encourage her.

"You do not understand," Miss Seabrook finally replied between sniffles.

"I am sure that I cannot. I know only that your father was once encouraging and now has changed his mind. It makes little sense to me," Darius confessed.

"He has changed his mind because of the awful man who is pressuring him. The Duke wants to marry me and he is terrible. I am frightened by the idea that I will have no choice but to marry him. I detest him in every way and cannot abide the thought of being his wife," she said, letting her worried flow.

Darius was terribly sad for her, unable to imagine the pressure of being trapped in such a position. It was not fair that a young lady wasn't allowed to come up with her own future, the she was swayed by the whims of the men in society around her. How could her father force her to marry someone she didn't like? It wasn't right.

"Miss Seabrook, I know nothing of being forced into a marriage, but I do understand misfortunate and suffering. I understand pressure," he said.

She tried to cease in her sobbing and looked up at him again. Darius was calm and patient, taking his time to speak so she could interrupt if she wished.

"How so?" she asked.

"My family is under a good deal of strain. You see, my father once worked for a very wealthy man. He had a good job and he enjoyed it. But, one day, my father outsmarted him. The came up with answers for the business that the owner could not come up with. He was so humiliated that he sent my father out into the street," he said.

"We lost everything."

Silence descended for a long moment before Darius was ready to continue. He cleared his throat and took another deep breath, readying himself for the remainder of the story.

"It was difficult on all of us. My father soon passed away from his grief. Later, my mother became sick. I believe it was because of the conditions we were living in that she was unable to remain healthy," he explained.

"I am so sorry. That is awful. That man was terrible for doing that to your father," she said.

"Yes, indeed. But I still had my brother, even after my mother passed. And now, my brother is married and he has children. Twins and a new infant," he said. "They are wonderful, but they cannot afford much. My brother was a coachman as it was the only work he could get after our father was so mistreated. But there was an accident and my brother's hand was severely injured. Now, he cannot work."

"Good heavens! You are the only one who is providing for them all?"

Miss Seabrook asked in astonishment.

“His wife bakes and sells her bread, but she does not make much money from it. And their housing conditions likewise make the work difficult for her. She had very little room and is always worried that one of the children will burn themselves on the oven,” he said.

“I can imagine. That would be terribly difficult. They must find a better home where they do not have that concern,” Miss Seabrook said.

“It is not so easy as that, but I do hope that one day they are able to get a better place to live. For now, we are doing all we can to ensure that we may get by. And I did not share all of that for you pity, but to tell you that I understand what it feels like to be trapped. I know how difficult it can be when your circumstances are determined for you and you have no say in them,” he told her.

Miss Seabrook nodded and she finally smiled at him with care and compassion.

“You seem to be an excellent brother,” she said.

“I do what I am able,” Darius replied.

“I would love to learn more about your brother and his family. You speak about them with such admiration and affection. I still know very little about you and I know that you told me it is better that way, but I disagree. I think it is important that I know the man who is teaching me so much about writing and life and humanity,” Miss Seabrook said.

Darius smiled and thought for a long moment. The idea forming in his mind was a risky one, but he still thought it could work.

“Miss Seabrook, I would like to take you on an outing. For research purposes,” he said.

“Oh?” she asked in surprise.

“Yes. I assume your father would want you to have a chaperone, but is there a chaperone who might keep an open mind?” he asked with a laugh.

Miss Seabrook laughed as well and gave a shrug.

“You are my tutor. That is enough of a chaperone,” she said. “He will not be bothered by the fact that you are a man because you have been hired by him.”

“Excellent,” Darius said, although he was both surprised and insulted that he would not be considered worthy of a chaperone with Miss Seabrook.

“Where are we going?” she asked.

“First, we must ask your father,” he said.

With that, Darius stood and made his way to the study where he knocked at the door.

“Come in,” came the voice on the other side. Darius opened and stepped through the door, bowing to Lord Seabrook.

“Ah, Mr. Frost. What may I do for you?” he asked.

“Please forgive the intrusion, my lord, but I wish to escort Miss Seabrook on an outing for the sake of research. I struggle with the lack of realism in some of her characters and I trust that I may help her find a depth to them as we walk,” he said.

Lord Seabrook looked at him with surprise and suspicion. It was obvious that he disliked the idea and was reluctant to accept it or approve of it.

“An outing, you say? For characters? What characters, exactly?”

“I wish for her to observe. She needs to see how mothers interact with children. How husbands and wives smile at one another in public, how friends laugh when they walk down the street. Little things like that,” he said.

Lord Seabrook straightened his shoulders and then brought a hand to his chin, stroking it in consideration.

“How long would you be away?” he asked.

“Perhaps two hours, my lord. It could be three, but I shall try to keep

it as short a time as possible,” he said.

“And you will not get her into any trouble? You will take her only in places which are safe?” he asked.

“Yes, my lord, of course. I am under your employ. I will be as cautious as I am able,” he promised.

Lord Seabrook sighed and gave a nod.

“You are going to get me in trouble with someone else, you know. He will be furious with me if he finds out. Nevertheless, you have my approval. Just take good care of her and do not allow anything to happen to her,” he said.

Darius was startled by how easy it had been to convince Lord Seabrook, which only convinced him further that all of this nonsense about trying to get Miss Seabrook to give up her dream was really the result of the Duke of Moreland’s insistence.

“Thank you, my lord. I am very grateful and I assure you that you will be delighted by the results of all that she learns today,” Darius said.

“I hope so,” Lord Seabrook muttered.

With that, Darius bowed and departed, rushing back to Lady Seabrook with his news.

“I am pleased to say that we have your father’s approval to take a journey to observe the interactions of people,” he said.

“Oh? How lovely. And am I to take notes as we go?” she asked.

“No, Miss Seabrook. This is a little bit different from that,” he said. “Come with me.”

Lady Seabrook followed and they made their way out onto the street. Darius stuffed a hand in his pocket and confirmed that he had precisely what he needed before hailing a coach. He would be able to pay for it and that was all that mattered. He and Miss Seabrook were going to visit his family and she would have the chance to meet them. She would see what his life was like.

Darius knew there was a risk that she might judge their living

conditions, but he was unbothered by it. From all he had seen of her, she was not the sort of woman to view people through a grim sense. She was someone who offered hope and opportunity and that was a dream for Darius.

“Here you are,” he said, helping her into the coach.

“So, where exactly are we heading? I am shocked my father allowed this and I expect you convinced him because we are going somewhere respectable?” she asked.

“Actually, Miss Seabrook, the place we are going is not somewhere I wish your father to know about,” he said. “I promise you will be safe, but I am taking you by coach for a reason. You see, there is a mother and her children I wish for you to observe. And two brothers. And a husband and wife. I trust you will learn a lot about characters through these interactions.”

“Is that so? I am delighted. I expect it is someone specific?” she hinted, clearly making the connection as to where he was taking her.

“Yes, Miss Seabrook. You will be learning a great deal for the sake of your writing. You will also be learning a great deal about me.”[18]

This idea is a lot of fun! I just had a few smaller suggestions though. Consider adding in details about the failed dinner party to better match your intro incident in the outline—it wasn't really a dinner party per se, but it was a dinner with the Duke and Lydia would have plenty of incidents to think about in that moment talking to him to refer back to, but she doesn't really do much more than mention it after a few minutes of her already establishing that she does not like the situation, with the reader and with the father. So, doing that would give more ground as to why she doesn't like the duke and to show the reader the more frustrating acts of his character.

Just like if you made up a chunk of text to show Lydia gradually improving to across the different lessons—like applying what Darius is teaching her as she learns all these writing fundamentals, that would also give the reader something to focus on as they read through and it'd give them plenty of opportunities to see Lydia improving themselves, to make her plot more dynamic rather than relying on Lydia saying this or that about the situation—so show us more of things going on, examples of her with Darius working out her scenes, of them acting even, just as well as we get more examples of the various little moments where the characters say that they “would” think this or that or do this or that—that's where you show with inner monologue or show through example.

Right now, the characters are almost there. You have them mostly down, you have their personalities down, you have their motivations mostly down, but give us more examples, more meat and potatoes so to speak, in the different situations to show their characters dynamically improving across the arc, especially Lydia's who is struggling to enhance a writing style which...takes years of practice and writing to get down.

Chapter Eleven

Lydia certainly [19] had not expected this, but she was delighted. Visiting Mr. Frost's brother and his family was such an exciting opportunity. She had been wanting to get to know Mr. Frost better and to understand his life. There seemed to be no better way to do that than by coming here.

"Darius?" his brother said with surprise as he opened the door. His eyes went wide when he saw Lydia beside him. "Oh! And who is this?"

"Alistair, this is Miss Seabrook. My student," he replied.

Alistair stared for a long moment before remembering himself.

"Well, you both must come in," he said.

Leading them inside, Lydia hoped that they weren't intruding on the family. But when she saw a lovely woman baking and two children playing on the floor and another in a bassinet, she realised that this was a happy life she had stumbled upon.

"Miss Seabrook, meet my brother, Alistair, and his wife, Elizabeth. These are their children, of course," Mr. Frost said.

"Ah! We have a guest!" Elizabeth exclaimed. "Please, you must sit. I shall get the tea."

"Elizabeth, darling, this is Darius's *pupil*," Alistair said, as if hinting something that Lydia didn't quite understand. But, at once, Elizabeth's face lost colour and she suddenly appeared panicked.

"Oh, then you must make yourself comfortable. I am so sorry about the conditions of our home," Elizabeth said with worry.

Lydia hated the apology. She didn't want anyone to treat her as though she was special purely because of her station. It was

embarrassing, but she knew that they were only trying to be polite. Not only that, but she expected that they would be this way with any visitor. It was clear that Elizabeth had her pride and wanted to keep a nice and tidy home.

“You must not apologise. It is perfectly comfortable,” Lydia said, before having a chance to even take it all in. She sat in a simple chair next to Mr. Frost and flashed him a smile.

Lydia tried to ignore the appearance of the home, or at least not to judge it. She had never been one to care about such things, but felt anxious that Alastair and his family would be embarrassed to have her there.

It was important that she show how comfortable she was. Otherwise, they might believe her to be every bit as rude and judgmental as others of her station.

The home was small and simple, back to back with all the others along the block. Not only that, but the road outside had a frightful stench to it.

Inside, however, Elizabeth had placed flowers throughout the home. With strong scents and delicate beauty, they certainly made things nicer.

“Well, there is an awful smell outside. We are trying to freshen things up a bit, but it is very difficult,” Elizabeth said, looking discouraged.

“All I can smell is hyacinth and fresh bread,” Lydia said with a smile, placing her hand gently on Elizabeth’s arm to calm her as she set the teacups on a small table in front of Lydia.

Elizabeth exhaled her worry and smiled, although Lydia sensed she was still rather concerned.

“You are too kind. The tea will just be a moment. And I will get bread and butter as well. Do you like jam? I have that as well,” Elizabeth said.

“I would love whatever is most convenient,” Lydia replied.

“Good heavens, Darius. She is not what I might have expected,” Alistair said with a slight laugh.

Lydia looked between the two brothers, trying to interpret the expressions on their faces. It seemed as though they were communicating something deeper than the surface of his comment. Was it possible that Mr. Frost had not thought well of her at first? Did he have concerns about someone of her station?

“Well, I am delighted that you have brought her here,” his brother added.

As they began to talk, Lydia quickly realised that Alastair was incredibly kind. He was certainly more shy than Mr. Frost, from what Lydia could tell, but it was also apparent that the two brothers were very close.

“My brother has always been the one who took care of us. Shameful, of course, as I am two years older and ought to be the one caring for us all,” Alastair said.

“Age has little to do with it,” Lydia said, comfortingly. “We all have different circumstances.”

“Yes, and my brother focused on growing his intellect when I was never the sort of fellow to enjoy my studies. I prefer to work with animals. Unfortunately, I was injured,” he said, holding up his right hand with his left to show a large scar.

Lydia waited for him to explain, saddened by the fact that he could not continue his work, but not understanding why.

“I am paralyzed up to the elbow. It is not quite enough to be able to lead a horse with just one hand. Nor can I properly care for a horse, so working as a groom is not an option either. Sadly, I have not yet found another opportunity[20],” he explained.

“He is, however, a very skilled man. I am encouraging him to try and find work as a footman,” Mr. Frost said.

“Oh? That would be ideal,” she replied.

“So often they are expected to carry things that require two hands,” Alastair retorted.

“Regardless, the day will come,” Elizabeth said with enthusiasm as she came over with the tea and bread on a small tray. “One day, you will find work.”

A lingering glance between husband and wife was enough to let Lydia know that all was well in the home. She listened to the laughter of the children, enjoyed the story of how Alistair and Elizabeth met, and finally, she and Mr. Frost got to play with Mary and Thomas.

“Your doll is lovely,” Lydia said, sweetly. The children were still so young and spoke very little, but Mary clearly understood Lydia’s sentiment. She held her little rag doll tightly and smiled.

When Lydia looked up at Mr. Frost, she saw that he was smiling at her. Their eyes locked for a moment and she felt her cheeks turning red from his expression. Was it possible that he was looking at her with some sort of admiration? It looked that way, but she could hardly believe it.

She returned her attention to Mary and Thomas, not letting herself get too caught up in his gaze. After all, Lydia knew that it was unwise to let herself indulge the idea that he might be interested in her. It was far better taking this opportunity to get to know him and his family better, rather than allowing herself to get distracted in a dream.

This side of Mr. Frost was different from what Lydia had already seen. He was happier, more at peace. He was soft and gentle in a way that contradicted the passion with which he spoke about books.

And in that moment, Lydia realised that she had viewed Mr. Frost in the same way that she so often viewed her characters. She had seen him through only one aspect of his identity. He was her tutor. Her attractive tutor, to be sure, but that was all.

Now, she recognised that he was also a happy man who took care of his family, a man who provided for them. He was a hard worker. He was strong and brave, diligent in everything he put his mind to.

Seeing the happiness of the family left Lydia aching for such a life. Although they had very little, they were still full of joy and she found herself somewhat jealous of that bliss.

Her own mother and father never had such happiness. They loved one another and they were good to her, but that was not the same as being

truly satisfied in life and enjoying every moment despite the frivolous nature of wealth and titles. She wondered if she would ever be able to have the peace that Alistair and Elizabeth had, knowing that despite having very little, they had one another.

“Are you enjoying yourself?” Mr. Frost asked as she pretended to feed Mary’s little doll.

“Very much,” she replied. “Thank you for bringing me here.”

Once more, Mr. Frost gave her that look. It was a look that told her he was glad she had come. She hoped that it was also a promise that he would bring her again.[21]

Chapter Twelve

Darius was overjoyed as he walked Miss Seabrook out to the street so they could find a coach. He could hardly believe how sweet and lovely she had been with his family. Not only had she been polite, but she was not even the slightest bit judgmental as he might have expected from another noble.

Ever since Darius met Miss Seabrook, she had been surprising him with her gentility and her class. She was not at all the sort of rude noblewoman who might look down on him or behave as if he were just another servant. Although his own father had been deeply mistreated by a nobleman once upon a time, it seemed that not all people of the ton were this way.

When Darius thought about what his father had been through, he was grieved. It had impacted the entire family and changed so many things. Nevertheless, he found that Miss Seabrook was changing the anger and bitterness he had felt all his life. Because of her, he could not lean into that hatred of high-ranking members of society.

And as he helped her into the coach, all Darius could think about was how happy it made him to have shared his life with her that day.

“Thank you for this,” Miss Seabrook said as they rode along.

“For what?” he asked, although delighted by her remark. He knew that she was thanking him for taking her to his family, he only wanted to know what about it had been special enough to her that she would comment about it.

“Thank you for trusting me enough to show me your life and allow me to meet your family. It was wonderful to see how happy they are and to watch you with your nieces and nephew,” she said.

He'd been so glad to invite her into this part of his life as well. He wished that he could also show her where he lived. It would not have

been proper and he understood that it could never happen, but there was a part of I'm that thought she would understand him better if she knew where his home was. She might even understand that he had worked very hard to not end up in a place like his brother had, although his own apartments were so small there was no chance he could ever have a family there.

"It was a pleasure getting to see you with them as well. I knew that Alistair and Elizabeth would enjoy the opportunity to speak with you, but I had not considered how you would be with the children. I must confess that I was very impressed by you," Darius said.

Miss Seabrook blushed and glanced out the window. For a moment, she appeared content and happy. Quickly, however, her face shifted into something less pleased and more grieved.

"What is it?" Darius asked. He was starting to wonder if he'd done something wrong, after all. Had he upset her? Had he made a mistake that she was only just now coming to realise?

"Forgive me. I do not mean to be so dour. It is only that I am surprised by the effect this visit has had upon me," she said.

"And why is that?"

"I did not know what a distraction it would be from my own pain. And while it is clear that I am a fool for having such pain, I feel it nonetheless," she said.

"Why does that make you a fool?" Darius scoffed, thinking it a ridiculous notion.

"I have everything," she replied. "There is nothing in England that I could want for. My mother and father provide me with all manner of clothing and jewelry. I am invited to the finest balls and gatherings. I have even been indulged to pursue my dream, although I know that my father believes nothing will come of it."

"Your father would not spend so much money on a tutor if he thought there was no point," Darius insisted.

"To the contrary, he does believe that the money is worth it. His intention is to use this year to prove to me that I need a husband and cannot make it on my own. He is only allowing me to do this so he

might gently break my spirit,” she replied.

Darius was grieved that she thought this was the reason her father had allowed her to take this year and improve her craft. And yet, he had a very strong feeling that she was correct. More than likely, Lord Seabrook really was only indulging her for the sake of proving that she needed to marry the man of his choosing and that she would be a fool to miss the opportunity.

Still, it was deeply unfair and Darius wanted her to know that there was someone who believed in her. He wanted her to know that he had already seen an improvement in her work in just this short amount of time. It seemed to him that, as she opened up to Darius, she was also growing more comfortable with writing emotions and creating characters who were not identical to her.

She was changing and so was her work. But in this short amount of time? Yes, there was still much more to be improved upon, yet her father could not reasonably write her off as an indulgent child.

Darius had done that at the start, only to be proven wrong. Lord Seabrook would one day be proven wrong as well.

“Regardless of my father’s confidence in me,” she continued, “I do understand that it is self-indulgent to be unhappy.”

“And why is that?” Darius asked.

“There are many out there who would expect your family to be miserable. In fact, most of the men and women of the ton would never believe me if I were to tell them how happy your brother’s family is when they live in a small home crowded by other homes. They would not believe me when I told them that it was a lovely place to be, that your family took pride in making it truly beautiful. They would think that your brother’s lack of financial fortune would mean that his family lives in despair,” she said.

“Instead, I can see that they are far happier than most of the men and women with whom I regularly interact. And, to be truthful, today was one of the happiest I have ever enjoyed. It was such a dream to be with them and to focus on something other than the life that my mother and father are forcing me to live.”

“How is that? Why do you think this day was so important? All you

did was spend time with my family,” Darius noted, surprised by how much it affected her.

Miss Seabrook sighed and then looked at him once more, her eyes full of compassion and contentment.

“I was reminded of what is important in this world. I was reminded that it has nothing to do with the gems or gowns that are constantly surrounding me. It is the people in our lives that make it worth living. Just as Elizabeth and Alistair make one another’s lives worthwhile, it is my family and those I love who make mine worth anything at all,” she answered.

Darius ached as he listened to Miss Seabrook. He realised just how heavy her heart was, how it longed for something more, for a hint of joy and the peace that he was able to experience constantly with his brother and Elizabeth and the children.

Miss Seabrook had so little of that. And yet, she did have those she loved. It was clear to him now that she considered them to be of the utmost importance and that was a great joy to him. But there was also a part of Darius that wondered if it was only her family she felt this strongly about or if there was the slightest chance that she might one day feel love for someone else.

He tried to shake the thought from his head. It was stirring up trouble, wondering if she could ever care for him the way Elizabeth cared for Alistair or the way her characters cared for one another.

It was in that moment that Darius had to admit the reality to himself.

He was beginning to fall for Miss Seabrook.

Yes, he had been attracted to her from the beginning. Even when she answered the door and he first assumed she was a maid until he had looked at her dress and figured out that she was a noblewoman, he had found her beautiful. He had thought she was lovely and genuine. But as he had gotten to know her better over the past couple of weeks, Darius had starting to think of her as far more than just his student.

She was becoming someone he couldn’t get out of his mind, someone he longed to be near to at all times. Even when it made no sense for him to care for her this strongly, she was deeply important to him.

Darius took a deep breath and stopped himself from reaching out to take her hand. All of this was spiraling. His feelings were no longer within his control and that worried him more than he cared to confess. But as Miss Seabrook eyed him for a moment with a gentle smile, Darius knew that everything had changed for him and he would never be the same again.

“Is everything all right?” she asked.

“Yes,” he said, quickly. “Yes, of course it is. I was simply thinking about your answer and how right you are that we must care most for those we love and allow everything else to fade away.”

“All the worries and fears and doubts mean nothing,” she said, as though trying to convince herself. She still appeared sad, but Darius had hope that she would come to know the sort of joy she desired. He hoped that he might be able to one day offer her even more of it, although it was unrealistic in every way.

“Quite right,” Darius replied, thinking a simple answer was best for now.

He clenched his hands tightly in his lap, trying once more to stop himself from reaching toward her, trying to comfort her in a way that would be seen as too familiar. It was hard to believe that he had only met her a short time ago. He was so comfortable with her that it seemed as if they had been close for a number of years and were able to speak freely and openly about all that they shared.

“My father can never know where we went today,” she said, quietly.

“I agree, Miss Seabrook. For the moment, it is best that he not know I took you to such a place,” Darius replied.

“He would not understand,” she whispered, gently.

Miss Seabrook sighed and looked out the window again, leaving the conversation as it was. Darius didn’t want to stop talking to her, but he had a feeling that she needed time to bask in her own thoughts. They would soon be at her home once more and he expected that they would quickly be thrown back into their studies and all the things that her father insisted they do.

But Darius was pleased that they would forever have this day. It was

one chance for them to truly indulge and enjoy all that they had been given in the world. Even if the world held it to be of little value, he trusted that Miss Seabrook saw his life as the gem that it was. And he hoped that, one day, she would be a part of it.

Chapter Thirteen

Lydia looked once more in the mirror at herself and grimaced. She looked like a painted peacock and could scarcely bear the thought of having to communicate with the Duke of Moreland when all she really wanted was to sit at her desk and write. Inspiration had struck, and yet she was forced to entertain that awful buffoon.

Making her way down the stairs to wait with her mother in the drawing room, Lydia imagined what it would be like if she were waiting for Mr. Frost instead. If he could come to dinner and speak with her mother and father as an equal, it would be the most astonishingly wonderful thing she had ever experienced.

Yes, that was deeply unrealistic, but was it possible that she could ever have it? Moreover, was it possible she could get through this evening with the Duke and not fall apart from her grief at having to speak with him?

The worst part for Lydia, however, was knowing that Mr. Frost would not be coming, for he was already there.

While Lydia was busy getting ready for dinner with the Duke, Mr. Frost had been forced to stay and look over some of her writing as he wrote a report of his own. Her father had asked him to create an evaluation system to mark Lydia's progress and she had felt terrible when Mr. Frost informed her that it meant he would need to stay behind a bit later. All the while, she was going to have to prance about in front of Lord Moreland, attempting to hide her disdain.

Before she reached the drawing room, Lydia could hear the voice of the Duke and realised that she was late. He had already arrived and was waiting for her, along with her mother and father.

Lydia entered the room and curtsied, pasting a smile on her face.

"Miss Seabrook, you look beautiful," Lord Moreland said, bowing and

eyeing her as though he were a wolf and she a hare.

"Thank you, Your Grace," she replied, sitting next to her mother on the settee. She tried to hide how repulsed she was by him for the sake of politeness and not wishing to humiliate her mother and father, even if she was angered by their insistence that she marry this man.

"Miss Seabrook, I do like the pearls around your neck. Certainly, I do hope they are not paste," he said with a gentle laugh. It was a great insult, suggesting that her family could only afford fakes, but Lydia's mother and father laughed along to indulge his attempt at humour.

"No, Your Grace," Lydia replied, stoically. "They are not paste. They were a gift passed down by my grandmother, a very famous author who was able to afford them on her own, without my grandfather's assistance."

Lydia's mother and father grew quiet, but Lord Moreland was merely confused by her lack of amusement at his joke. His mouth twitched in an uncertain smile.

"Well, that is quite impressive of her. Still, no woman should put herself in a role that belongs to a man. It is better that she simply wear the elegant finery as opposed to paying for it," he insisted.

"You think so? And why is that? Is a woman unable to provide anything for herself?" she challenged him.

The Duke paused and glanced at Lydia's father for a moment. There was a silent question that passed between them and Lydia felt that they had an entire conversation in that one glance. Whatever it was, her father seemed to understand what was expected of him and he stood.

"My dear, we ought to leave the Duke and Lydia to speak in private," he said.

Lydia was frightened, desperate for them to remain. Why would they leave her there? Why would they simply go away and allow her to suffer in the presence of the Duke? It was not fair and she was frightened that there was some other awful surprise yet to come.

"Mother, please, you must stay," she said in a desperate plea, trying to sound cheerful so as not to be rude. "I should hate for the Duke to

think that I am improper if I am alone with him.”

“There is no question as to your chasteness, Miss Seabrook,” the Duke said, far too bluntly for Lydia’s comfort.

She turned to him with wide eyes, her shock overwhelming.

“Well, I should think not!” she shouted, standing.

“Lydia!” her father hissed. She looked at him and saw his anger. Immediately, Lydia sat back down and held herself in a poised position, slowing inhaling and exhaling to see what was about to happen to her.

Once her mother and father had left the room, with the door still open for propriety’s sake, Lord Moreland came to sit beside her.

“Miss Seabrook,” he said, taking her hand in his own. “I know that you are attempting to engage in all of the expectations of a young woman and I appreciate that. Your determination to remain virtuous is very noble and you have certainly proven that you are trustworthy.”

“I am not trying to prove anything to you,” she said.

“You do not need to, truly. I respect you with my utmost being. I find you to be exactly what a man longs for in a woman and that is something we rarely do find,” he said.

“Lord Moreland, I am not sure what it is you expect of me, but I fear that I will only serve to disappoint you,” Lydia said, hoping he would understand that she had no affection for him at all, but knowing that she couldn’t come right out and say it.

“On the contrary, you are precisely the woman I wish to spend my life with. Now, do you not feel the same way? I am a hardworking, wealthy, moral man and I have been told that I am quite handsome as well. There are many women who have desired to marry me. What a shame it would be if the one woman with whom I wish to live my entire life is the only one who does not want me,” he said, sadly.

“Your Grace, I am not trying to offend you, but I find it very difficult to want to marry you when I hardly know you,” Lydia said, still attempting to be gracious in her refusal.

“But you know me enough to reject me,” he said in anguish.

Lydia felt that she was being manipulated. It was not through his genuine feelings, but seemed to be very intentional. The Duke's tone of voice and his dramatic gestures did not match the emotionless gleam in his eye. There was no heart behind the things he said or the distress he attempted to convey.

Was it possible that he only wanted to marry her because she didn't want him? Or was it because of her own appearance? Or her respectability? She couldn't quite understand why he wanted to wed her when they shared so little feeling between them. Lydia was disgusted by him and his fake behaviour. She wanted to pull away, but the Duke took her hand in that moment and leaned close to her.

“Miss Seabrook, I do not know why you torment me this way, but you must know that I care for you more than I can express,” he said.

“I have no intention of tormenting you, Your Grace. I merely want to understand what is motivating you to be so bold with me. I cannot understand it for I think there is nothing between us that would warrant it,” she confessed.

But he simply shook his head and expressed some strange attempt at being emotional. His brow twisted and his eyes strained, although no tears came to them. He clenched his jaw but rather than grief, it expressed only anger. Indeed, he was failing quite miserably and Lydia was growing weary of this charade.

“I would ask that you allow me to have more time and space,” she said, thinking it was the only way to get him to leave her alone. Lydia wanted her hand back and hated how the Duke held it, but she feared that pulling away would only make him angry.

“How much more time and space am I to give you? Why will you not understand that I love you very much, that I want nothing more than to make you a happy wife? I would be a good husband to you. I fear that someone has lied to you or told you otherwise. Tell me, has someone been whispering lies to you?” he asked.

“No one has said anything, Your Grace. But I have been promised this year to pursue my writing. I care very much for it and any man who wishes to be my husband must know the importance of supporting me in my dreams,” Lydia said.

“But your dream is just a little hobby that will never turn into anything more,” he said, as though she ought to know better. “Certainly you would prefer to have your husband look after you so that you might stay home and do your hair and wear extravagant perfume, yes?”

Lydia stared at him for a long moment, wondering if he was being serious. Did the Duke really believe that was all she wanted? Did he think that any woman in the world was content doing nothing more than smelling nice? Surely he understood that women had substance and skill.

“Your Grace,” she said. “I fear that you do not know me at all.”

But her greater fear was that he would one day marry her and still make no effort to learn more.

Chapter Fourteen

Darius finally finished his work and had gathered his belongings together so he could depart for home. It was getting late and he would need to take a coach if he was going to arrive home without being too exhausted to make himself dinner.

As he was preparing to leave, Darius walked past the drawing room. The door was wide open and there, just inside, he saw Miss Seabrook with the Duke of Moreland, their heads close in conference and the Duke's hand upon Miss Seabrook's.

They were close. Closer than Darius was comfortable with. Although he knew that he had no say in her affairs, he was deeply grieved that Miss Seabrook would allow herself to care about a man like the Duke.

Everyone in England knew that he was a rake. His name had been in the society pages at least twice for being found with young women when he ought not to have been. Did Miss Seabrook not know? Or did she not care?

When he'd heard her speak with her father, it sounded as though she did not wish to marry the Duke, but Darius was now realising that it was a matter of her wanting to accomplish her goals with writing before they married. Clearly, she had feelings for the Duke and it was only a matter of time before she decided they had delayed the wedding long enough already.

She would want to hurry up and marry him before it was too late. A man like that could find another bride rather quickly, as far as Darius could tell. And if she was falling in love with the Duke, she was wise to be in a hurry.

Still, it grieved Darius. At last, he pulled himself away from the door, suddenly in a dark mood.

Making no effort to find a coach, he decided to walk. It was already

nearly dark when he set out and his walk was fairly long, but he no longer cared. Everything was coming into sharp focus and he understood the vast difference between his hopes and dreams versus the reality of the world in which he lived.

Miss Seabrook had humoured him by spending time with his family. She was too polite to remind Darius that he was merely a hired tutor. And now, he had to accept the truth.

He could never compete with a duke.

Darius couldn't bear a day inside with Miss Seabrook where they were forced to make conversation and look over specific works of literature. He couldn't debate the romance of a novel when his own heart was twisting in anguish.

"I believe we ought to take another trip for inspiration. You are doing a wonderful job of growing the depths of your characters, but we must work on setting," he said.

"Oh?"

"Yes, indeed. The atmosphere is still lacking in your work. I should like for you to describe more of the outdoors to me," Darius said.

"Well, you must understand that I spend so much of my life indoors that I can hardly say," she said with a laugh.

Darius remained stiff and raised an eyebrow.

"Then it is time you get out so your poor readers will not be bored by your droning on about estates and parlours," he said.

Miss Seabrook blushed in embarrassment and her eyes were downcast, but Darius didn't apologise for his rude remark. He couldn't. He was still too upset about the night before and realising that Miss Seabrook was in love with the Duke of Moreland.

No matter how much trouble he was getting himself into, he didn't feel he could stop. His heart was wounded, despite knowing that he had no reason or excuse to be this upset. It wasn't fair to be mad at her just because she had fallen in love. Her father had been pushing

her towards this and she had spent her entire life trying to be the proper woman who could marry a duke.

Still, he was upset.

They made their way towards the Thames and it wasn't long before they had reached the rocky riverside and stood a short distance from the shoreline.

"I have heard many grievances about the poor who dredge these waters," Miss Seabrook said.

"Yes, well, you will not see them along here until nightfall. During the day, they spend their time on the other side of the river where they will not be shooed away by those of your rank," Darius said.

"Why would anyone shoo them away?" she asked, looking at him with concern.

"Because they are poor wretches and they get in the way of what beauty this river holds. You know, there are sections that are lovely, like this. And then, there are sections of the river that a woman like you would not be seen," he continued.

She was clearly hurt by his judgments, but Darius needed this distance between them. If he could use his pride for his own defense, he had no choice but to take full advantage of it, just as he had when they first met.

"Well, what is it you wish for me to do then, if I am so inclined to offend people that I can barely be of any use?" Miss Seabrook asked.

"I brought you here so you could be inspired while writing near the water. Look out at the waves, describe everything you see. I do not want to hear that the sky is blue and the water is filled with muck. I want passion, fire, and details," he said.

"Yes, of course," she replied in a meek voice.

"That is not passion," he scolded.

She took a step back from him, clearly frightened by his sudden change in behaviour. He feared that she might step on one of the stones and lose her balance, but she was perfectly steady and he tried

not to have such a deep concern for her when he was trying so hard to be cold.

“Forgive me, Mr. Frost, but have I offended you?” she asked.

Darius swallowed, knowing that he had gone too far and had hurt her feelings. He was ashamed of his attitude, but it was too late to go back.

“No, I am not offended,” he said. “I just want you to do better than you have before.”

“Are you certain? You are being quite argumentative. I feel that I must have said or done something that grieved you,” she said.

Darius laughed bitterly and shook his head.

“Just because I am trying to hold you to a higher standard and convince you to do better work, now you think that I being argumentative? Is it argumentative to simply do my job and force you to work harder and write something that readers might actually enjoy?” he asked with sarcasm.

She shrunk back once more and shook her head, unable to meet his gaze.

“I suppose not. Now, if you will excuse me, I do believe that I must get to work at once. I should be very angry at myself if I did not do as you have instructed,” she said, stiffly. Darius could hear the hurt in her voice, hear the desperation for the man he had been thus far.

He watched Miss Seabrook walk away from him, making her way towards the water with her paper in hand, the rest of her supplies in the purse at her waist. She was beautiful in every way, but he hated how much he longed to be close to her. It would never be possible. He could never indulge in truly enjoying her company and they would never be equals. It was a fool’s hope to think that she would ever see him as anything other than her tutor.

But as Miss Seabrook drew nearer to the water, she misstepped on one of the stones and lost her balance, falling forward with a yelp of pain.

“Miss Seabrook!” he called, rushing over to her, taking care not to fall himself.

A wave came rushing toward her and Darius moved to drag her away so she wouldn't find herself drenched or, worse yet, carried in by the current that had taken so many to their deaths.

"Oh! Goodness, could this get any more humiliating?" she cried in frustration.

"Are you all right, Miss Seabrook?" Darius asked.

"No, I feel like a fool," she said, the tears spilling down her cheeks. "I was trying to get close so that I could feel the water lapping at my feet or be overcome by the sound of it. I thought that might help my writing. Now, I am simply dirty, wet, and my ankle is in agony. It feels as though it snapped"

Darius bent down to take a look at her ankle. In proper society, this was not something he would ever be allowed to do, but she had injured herself and he needed to know how bad it was and decide how to proceed forward.

"It hurts terribly. How bad is it?" she asked.

He gently touched the swelling, red joint where she had twisted it. There was no chance that she would be walking again right away. Miss Seabrook might even have to see a doctor before she could move on.

"This looks bad," he confessed.

"It hurts," she whimpered, clenching her fists from the pain. Darius knew that the only way for them to get off the beach was for him to carry her.

"Very well, Miss Seabrook. This was a dreadful idea, bringing you here. Please, allow me to get us out of here," he said.

With that, Darius placed one hand at her back and the other arm slid under her knees. He understood the implication of something like this, but no longer cared about propriety when she was in pain and discomfort.

Darius lifted Miss Seabrook in his arms and he stood, tall and strong, knowing that he could take care of her as long as she needed him to.

“What? What are you doing? You cannot possibly carry me all the way to the street!” she exclaimed.

Darius smiled and looked down at her lovely face as she stared up at him with surprise.

“Miss Seabrook, you are light as a feather. I could carry you all the way to your home if I needed to. However, I do believe it is best to get you to the doctor first,” he replied with a laugh.

“Goodness, my father will be shocked,” she said.

“Because you are going to the doctor or because a man he hired is currently carrying you?” Darius asked.

“Both, I suppose. But I do believe we ought not to tell him about this part,” she said with a nervous laugh, one that seemed almost delighted.

Darius agreed, knowing that he would only get into trouble if he was caught doing this. Perhaps her father would understand that she was unable to walk, but to have a peasant’s hands upon his daughter? It was not exactly the sort of thing that would gain Darius any favour.

“I am terribly sorry for how I spoke to you earlier,” Darius said, realising he owed her an apology. She looked hesitant to accept right away.

“Why exactly did you argue with me so much?”

“To be frank with you, I am having a rather difficult day. I have been angry and I was foolish enough to throw that anger your way and force you to bear the brunt of it. I understand that it was the act of a weak man and I am not proud, but you must excuse my behaviour and know that I never meant you any ill will,” he explained, trying to be vague about his anger.

“I understand what it is like to mistreat someone due to the actions of another. Still, I hope that we may move on from this and be at peace once more,” she said, as if it were a question.

“Yes, Miss Seabrook. Of course. I shall let go of the things that are bothering me. I cannot risk you being hurt again in an effort to escape

me,” he said.

“It is done now,” she replied. “And I am grateful that you helped me.”

Once they made it to the street, there were coaches to be hailed and Darius procured one that could take them to the doctor. While there were many people staring, he hoped that none of them knew Miss Seabrook. If they were caught like this by any noblemen or women, it would be a very compromising circumstance.

“Here, we must get you into the coach at once,” he said.

“Yes, thank you,” she replied.

The coachman assisted and, soon enough, Miss Seabrook was comfortable and waiting for Darius so they could leave.

As they departed, he glanced at Miss Seabrook once more and smiled. He had made many mistakes that day, but he would never forget the feeling of having her in his arms.

Chapter Fifteen

Lydia finished getting herself ready for the lesson. She had not seen Mr. Frost in two days, not since she had fallen. The doctor had instructed her to stay in bed and get some rest, so she had obeyed.

But all she could think about in that time was the tender moment she had experienced, resting in Mr. Frost's arms. It had been such an incredible experience, one that had revealed something she never would have been able to admit to her father.

[She was in danger of falling in love with him\[22\].](#)

This was certainly something she could not admit to her father, or even her mother. They would not understand. Moreover, her father was still determined she should marry the Duke of Moreland and it was a grievance that she couldn't bear.

Although the Duke had been made aware of her accident, he had not even come to inquire as to her wellbeing. When Lydia had mentioned this to her father, he only made excuses about how busy the Duke was and that she ought to simply let it be.

Mr. Frost, however, had sent around a card in each of those two days, just telling her that he was thinking of her and he was looking forward to returning to their studies and reading her work again.

Lydia waited for him in the library and when Mr. Frost walked in, she stood quickly, her breath catching in her throat as if further confirming that there was something about this man that truly meant everything to her. Indeed, she was falling in love.

"Miss Seabrook, how are you? Is your ankle doing any better?" he asked.

"Indeed," she replied. "I am able to stand now, with this crutch of

course, but that should only be for another week or so, according to the doctor.”

“I am glad to hear it. I do hope that your recovery is swift and that you are able to return to your normal activities,” Mr. Frost said.

“Well, fortunately my favourite activity requires only that I sit at a desk,” she said with a laugh, glancing to the pages beside her.

“Quite right! That is a good thing, indeed. And how is your work coming along?” he asked, coming to sit beside her as they usually did.

“I think it is all right, but I do worry here that I have not managed to give Mary her real place to shine,” she said.

“Allow me to take a look at it,” Mr. Frost said.

Lydia handed him the pages and he began to read. She, meanwhile, looked over his shoulder to read along with him.

Mary entered the room in her loveliest dress, clearly happy to be seen by all those who surrounded her. But she did very little to try and charm them. It seemed as though she expected everyone to simply come to her.

After only the first paragraph, Mr. Frost turned to her and gave a pitiful smile.

“So what is it?” Lydia asked. “I know that it is inadequate, but I cannot figure out what is wrong.”

“Indeed, Mary falls quite flat. Look at what you have said about her. She is in her loveliest dress. But what makes it lovely? Is it a red dress? Is it silk? And what does the colour and fabric say about her nature? Is she a wealthy woman who can afford the silk or is she a temptress in red? Or if you imagine her in a blue, cotton dress, does that mean she is demure and innocent?” he challenged her.

Lydia winced, knowing he was right. It was such a simple detail to add.

“And here, you say that she is clearly happy. How? What makes her seem happy? Is she smiling broadly or is her gaze fixed and intent? And she did very little to try and charm the others, but what did she do instead to show such aloofness? You could have mentioned that

rather than charming them, she busied herself preening amongst them to garner attention,” he explained.

“My goodness, how did I miss all of that?” Lydia asked.

“Again, you have received the comment many times that you are technically proficient, but your characters lack detail and thought. You are certainly coming along and I am proud to see that, but these are the finer details you must notice,” Mr. Frost said.

Taking a deep breath and hoping for the best, Lydia determined that she would do better. With that renewed vigour, she sat beside Mr. Frost and listened as he continued through the piece and telling her what might be added to improve her work.

Lydia loved having the opportunity to be so near to him. All she wanted was to share more of her soul, to make him see what sort of woman she was. She dreamt that, one day, Mr. Frost would know how deeply she cared for him and he would care for her as well.

Immediately, Lydia regretted the thought. She didn’t want to be distracted by wishes and hopes. Mr. Frost was still looking at her, waiting for an answer, so she smiled and pushed away all other thoughts.

“My work is coming along well, I think. Although I have been ordered to rest, I did a bit of writing while in bed and I do think that your plan worked. Despite my accident at the beach, I have worked to create more of an atmosphere as you suggested,” she told him, handing over a few sheets of paper with her work.

“Ah, I see,” he said. “But this scene takes place in a library.”

“Just because I was inspired by the water does not mean I must write about it. While I was in bed, I was simply longing to be in here. I wanted to smell the musk of the books, to bask in the stillness of the room. I wanted to hide in the shadows cast by the shelves and to utterly forget my whereabouts as I became lost in the world of an author I love,” Lydia explained.

She was struck by the expression on Mr. Frost’s face. There was a depth in his eyes that she had not yet seen before. And in that moment, Lydia realised they had drawn closer to one another. It was then that she sensed her feelings were, indeed, returned. Mr. Frost

clearly felt something for her as well. And that was everything she could have ever hoped for.

He seemed to remember himself and Mr. Frost leaned back, away from her. He focused on the pages without another word and started to read. It was sheer agony for Lydia to watch him go through each scene without saying anything. She had no idea if he was enjoying it or not and his face was utterly unreadable.

At last, he looked up and gave a contented sigh.

“Your writing is coming along magnificently. I had hoped from the beginning that you would be a quick study, but this is remarkable. The way you have described the room, with the lush hues of forest green and oak brown, as well as the mention of a lingering scent of cigar smoke and vanilla, all of these things add to the atmosphere of the setting,” he said.

“I am delighted,” Lydia replied, exhaling in relief.

“But the thing that impresses me the most is how you made Mary interact with the room in the story,” he continued.

“Oh?”

“You did not simply describe the setting, you described how and why the setting mattered. You showed Mary’s memory of her father bumping his head on the fireplace mantle that jutted out too far. You mentioned William’s attachment to the tobacco leather chair since the loss of his uncle who always sat there. And you added these details without allowing them to overrun the scene,” he said.

“So I did it well?” she asked, hardly able to contain her excitement.

“You did it very well. You gave the reader a sense of who these characters are. And I am impressed because you told me that you wrote it for missing the library, but you changed many of the details. Rather than simply reciting the room you know, you created a whole new library,” he noted.

“I did not think it would be fun to write about this room exactly. I enjoy using my imagination,” she said with a shrug.

“And it shows. You did a tremendous job. Very well done. I am more

than pleased with your work,” Mr. Frost said.

“Thank you, Mr. Frost. I hope that I am able to continue improving and giving you something to be impressed by,” she said.

“I fully expect that you shall,” he replied.

They continued working and, with every moment, Lydia felt that they were growing closer. She wanted to continue like this forever, just enjoying her time with Mr. Frost and not having to think about the year she had been given to make a change in her life. She didn’t want to think about Lord Moreland and the fact that he was desperate to marry her for a reason she could not quite figure out.

Still, when the day came to an end and Lydia was certain that she and Mr. Frost were growing even closer together than before, she started to ask herself what was going to happen in the end. Would she be stuck marrying Lord Moreland anyway? Would she manage to create the life she longed for?

Or was it possible that she would find a way to tell Mr. Frost that she wanted nothing more than to be with him?

On Saturday, Lydia was grieved that she would not see Mr. Frost. Have missed two days with him that week already, it felt as though a part of her was being taken every time he left. Nevertheless, when she was putting away a book in the library, she was surprised to find a paper folded up neatly in the open space.

Lydia took it, curious about its contents. As she unfolded and began to read, her heart melted.

"I went to the garden to find a marigold, but there were none to be found.

I searched through the weeds for a dandelion, but all I saw was the grass.

I continued my search for daisies and cornflowers, but it was all for naught,

So, I made my way to the library, and there it was at last.

A flower unlike any other, with petals of strawberry-gold,

With eyes that shone like moss on a maple, and a laugh like birds on the air,

She turned to me and handed the pages that I could read in time,

For in that moment, I could not read. No, I could naught but stare.

Although she is a queen of stars, untouchable for me,

She writes as though the world is fair, as if all are the same.

And even when I remember the truth, that she is queen and I am man,

Still, I find that I am struck each time she speaks my name.”

Lydia gasped at [23]the end of the poem, knowing that this had been written by Mr. Frost and was meant for her. Was it simply meant as a compliment or was he sharing his heart? The words appeared full of affection and romance, but Lydia couldn't allow herself to believe it.

Did he really look at her this way? Did he think that she was this important? Or was he simply trying to amuse her or flatter her? She couldn't quite tell. All she knew was that this was a remarkable thing he had done, something she hoped he would continue to do. If it was possible that Mr. Frost cared for her as much as this poem seemed to suggest, Lydia knew that everything was going to be all right in time. Things would get better. They had to.

It was not possible that she could be this close to happiness only to end up with Lord Moreland.

Lydia knew that things could quickly change, but she hoped with all her heart that this was just the next step in growing closer to Mr. Frost. If they were going to continue working on her writing, she

trusted that she would eventually be able to write something this lovely to him in reply. And when that day arrived, Lydia wanted to be ready. She wanted to understand what was in her heart so she could say exactly what needed to be said.

Of course, she could not do that until she was sure that she had not misread him. If there was any chance that she was wrong, that he did not feel this way about her, she would be humiliated. For now, she had no choice but to remain silent and hope that they would understand one another soon enough.

Chapter Sixteen

Darius was extremely nervous to see Miss Seabrook again. He could hardly believe that he'd been so daring as to leave her a poem! And what if she was not moved by it? What if he arrived at the estate only to find that her father was going to relieve him of his work?

It was certainly possible and Darius would be humiliated if it turned out that way. He ought to have known better after seeing Miss Seabrook with the Duke of Moreland.

But he could not help himself. He needed her to know how he saw her, even if it was a dangerous position in which to put himself.

As he reached the townhouse, Darius was surprised to find Miss Seabrook outside, sitting on the steps in front of the home.

"Miss Seabrook, what a surprise," he said.

She looked up at him with a grin, the paper holding his poem in her hands.

"Ah, I see you received my poem," he said with a nervous laugh.

"I did, indeed," she replied. "And I must confess that I found it to be one of the most remarkable pieces of writing I have ever stumbled upon."

His heart began to race, shocked by this response. Although he knew well that it was an imperfect poem, he hoped that she was not merely trying to flatter him. Had she really enjoyed it? Was she truly moved by it?

"Surely you cannot be serious," he said.

"I am. Your words were so vivid and it was a delight to know what it was you think of me," she said.

"Well, I know you are fond of prose, but we have never discussed

poetry. Do you enjoy it as well?" he asked.

"I love poetry," she answered. "While I am not exactly able to write it with any sense of ease, I do enjoy trying. However, the opportunity to read the work of others is a far greater joy to me. I am able to write a story, as you said, but there is something so...well, I suppose poetry is a dot and prose is a line."

"Whatever do you mean by that?" he asked.

"Prose allows the continuity of telling a story. I am able to move from one stage to the next and each step leads to the following. But poetry is a story within a single dot. It is the effervescent and vivid tale of a single element. It may be about a woman or it could be about an incident that took place. At times, a poem even covers many years. But it is focused and alert to one thing," she said.

Darius smiled, hoping he understood her properly.

"Yes, I suppose," he said. "I have seen many stories told through poetry, but they are always about the same woman or the same place or even a single strand of hair."

"Precisely. A poem is an expounded upon theme. I enjoy it, but I am unable to write it well," she clarified.

"Perhaps we must fix that," he said.

Darius sat beside her, leaving enough of a gap between them that they did not have to fear being seen by any passersby. He was anxious that Miss Seabrook would scoot further from him, but she did no such thing.

The poem had been one of many that he had written for her. The others, he carried with him, hoping for the chance to slip a few more into the library. She had assured him that she was the only one who ever indulged in there, but he still wanted to remain cautious.

These were the only gifts he was able to give to her. No matter how many gems he wished he could hand over, even an entire estate if he could, Darius knew there was no chance he would ever be able to do something like that. He could only do this.

"Well, I must confess that I was rather anxious about writing that for

you. In truth, I was afraid that your father might find it and think that I was..." Darius trailed off. He knew exactly what he had been trying to do and her father would know as well. He could hardly sit there and deny it to Miss Seabrook when, surely, she understood that he had been expressing the depth of his feelings for her.

"Mr. Frost, you do not need to worry about anything," she said.

He looked up at her and smiled.

"I..." Miss Seabrook began, hesitating. "I considered the last line of the poem, as well. How you mentioned that I call you by your name. In truth, however, I call you only Mr. Frost and, as you know, that is simply the proper way to say it."

"Yes, but you do not call me *tutor* or *the hired man*. You still refer to me by name," he said.

"Indeed, and yet I feel that when you call me by Miss Seabrook, it is not the same as if you were to call me by the name I was born with," she said.

"Oh?" Darius asked, surprised that she was suggesting he call her by anything more familiar.

"You may call me Lydia," she said.

He paused, but his shoulders relaxed from the peace of this wonderful moment.

"And you may call me Darius," he replied.

They grinned at one another all over again and Darius felt the affection of a child. He could hardly contain himself, such was his joy.

"I suppose we ought to go inside and do our work," Lydia said, sounding somewhat disappointed by the fact.

"Indeed, we ought to. But I am thankful, Lydia, for the chance to know you better," Darius said.

"As am I, Darius," she replied, his name sounding like a song upon her lips.

Darius followed Lydia inside and they continued to work on her writing. He was growing ever more entranced by her and her work as well. She was a skilled writer, indeed, and he sensed that she would only continue to improve as she went along.

But as their lesson drew to a close, Darius had to depart and he knew that this was going to be painful, but he had to pry himself away from her.

"I suppose we shall discuss it more the next time I come," he said.

"Yes, of course. And I do hope you have a lovely rest of your day," she replied, politely. They were both stiff with the formality that was expected between them, but Darius was certain that she, too, would have preferred to be at ease.

He left the home and made his way through London, walking the streets for nearly two hours as he considered his plight. He had agreed to eat dinner with Alistair and Elizabeth that evening and when he arrived, his heart was full from all the feelings he had been trying to keep at bay.

"Darius, there you are! I was beginning to worry that you might not come. You are late," Elizabeth said.

"Forgive me, I decided to walk," he said, handing her the milk, cheese, and potatoes he had brought them.

"Thank you. We hoped that we would have time with you before supper, but I have already set the table," Elizabeth continued, putting away the items he had given her.

"Perhaps he shall just stay here this evening," Alistair suggested, coming to the table with Mary and Thomas beside him.

"I would love to, but I haven't any clothes here. I am working again tomorrow and must be dressed in my finest garments," Darius said.

"I still have some very nice clothing. You may wear it instead," Alistair replied.

Darius appreciated the thought and he wanted very much to stay and speak with his brother and Elizabeth. There was so much that he was trying to decide, so much he wanted to work through in his mind.

At last, when dinner was nearly finished, he was ready to tell Alistair and Elizabeth how he felt about Lydia.

“There is something I wish to share with you both and I understand that it may come as a bit of a shock, but I also think you will understand,” he began.

Alistair leaned forward, his elbows resting beside his empty plate on the simple, wooden table.

“What is it, Darius?” Elizabeth asked.

“Well, you have met my pupil, Lydia,” he began.

“You mean Miss Seabrook?” Alistair asked, his tone quite formal as if warning Darius not to call her by her first name.

“Yes, well, we have agreed to call one another by our Christian names now,” he explained.

“Is that not too familiar for the daughter of a lord?” Elizabeth asked with worry.

“She is very different from what you might expect of a woman in her station. And that is what I wish to share with you both. You see, I cannot help myself. I am falling in love with her,” he said.

Silence descended upon them all and Elizabeth looked at the confused little ones and took a deep breath.

“Perhaps I ought to get the children down and allow you two to speak alone,” she said.

At that, Darius knew that there was trouble afoot. For some reason, Elizabeth and Alistair clearly did not support the feelings he was now having. Dread filled his chest as he realised that there was nothing more he could say or do. They had already decided that he was making a mistake and he couldn’t even defend himself against their conviction of it.

“Darius, have you thought about this?” Alistair asked once Elizabeth and the children departed.

“What do you mean? It is the only thing I am able to think about. All the time, she is on my mind. At every moment, I want nothing but to be with her. She is everything to me, Alistair. I do not know how it happened, but it has. My thoughts are constantly consumed by her,” he said.

“But it is not possible for the two of you to be together and you know that. What will happen when her father finds out? You think that he is going to welcome you with open arms? That he will allow you to marry his daughter? Honestly, Darius, I want you to be happy, but this is madness,” Alistair insisted.

Darius sucked in a sharp breath. It hurt to hear that from his brother, and yet, he had expected it. Nevertheless, he wondered why Alistair had to be so discouraging. If there was any change at all that Darius and Lydia could be together, didn't he want that for Darius?

“I want you to have a wonderful life and marriage, just as I do. I want you to have a family and to be with the woman you truly love. But I also must caution you against this. You cannot find yourself caught up with a woman who will never be yours. Just think about it, Darius. Her father would never allow it. Society would never allow it. There is no possible way that it could be anything more. Your situations are too far apart,” he continued.

“But you do not know her the way that I do. She does not consider things like station and position. She is not obsessed with wealth or any of that. She is a good woman, Alistair. She is kind and gentle, with a heart unlike any other. I assure you that she will surprise you,” Darius said.

“Will she? Has she confessed her love for you? And I do hope that you have said nothing of this to her,” Alistair said.

“Of course I haven't. I am not as foolish as you think. But it is clear to me that my feelings are returned. She speaks to me so similarly as to how Elizabeth speaks to you. She shows me the same affection and gentility. She is such a remarkable woman and you could not possibly know how much I care for her,” Darius said.

“But I do know that a woman like her will never be allowed to marry you, Darius. Even if she does feel for you the same as you feel for her, I am frightened that you will only have a broken heart at the end of this. I am frightened that you are going to come out of this in pain

once you realise that she could never be your wife and you could never be her husband,” he said.

“You do not know that. Not really. There is no one to tell me that I cannot make her happy or provide for her,” Darius said.

Alistair paused and shook his head. Darius knew that he was being unrealistic, but how could he let go of these feelings? He loved Lydia so much and everything had happened so quickly. There was nothing he could do to change it. He had already fallen too deeply in love with her.

“I wish that you would only support me and remind me that I am deserving of love. I wish I could understand why you are not allowing me to live in the joy that I feel,” Darius said.

“Because I know what it is like to work for men like Lord Seabrook and I know that they will never accept you. That is all there is for us, Darius. Rejection and the reminder that we do not belong among them,” he answered, his tone distraught and hopeless for the situation they were both in.

“Very well. I suppose you are correct. And for that, I must leave you for the night. Please tell Elizabeth I am grateful for the dinner,” he said.

“Darius, you mustn’t leave just because of this,” Alistair insisted.

But Darius nodded as he stood.

“Yes, brother,” he said. “I must leave. I cannot stay when my heart is so heavy. Nor can I wallow as I desire. For the time being, there is little for me to do but accept my fate and try to move on.”

Chapter Seventeen

Darius was still upset and grieving the words of his brother from the night before. He didn't want to admit that Alistair could be right, but what more was he to do?

If Lydia could never be his wife, there was little point in allowing his feelings for her to grow. He was only going to be hurt in the end, just as his brother had warned. Now, more than ever, he had to think about what the future held and acknowledge that there was nothing for him but a life of loneliness and strife.

He could never love again.

As he was making his way to the library, Darius overheard Lord and Lady Seabrook in the drawing room. He paused for a moment to hear their conversation when he realised that they were speaking about Lydia and marriage.

"She is going to make a lovely bride," Lady Seabrook said with a sigh.

"Of course she is. And the Duke of Moreland can hardly wait. He is already discouraged that he is having to be so patient. I fear what might happen if we do not hurriedly get her to jump into the marriage. Honestly, she will be such a happy bride once we actually manage to get this settled properly," Lord Seabrook said.

"The Duke seems to be a good man and he certainly likes her. Still, I have heard a few rumours about him. Unsubstantiated, of course, but are you not concerned?" Lady Seabrook asked.

"Those rumours are nonsense. Most likely started by the fathers and mothers of girls who could not get his attention. You know, he is so wealthy and handsome and all that everyone wants their daughter to marry him. They cannot help it that he has set his eyes on our Lydia or that she will be a happy wife to him," Lord Seabrook answered.

Darius's heart stopped as he listened to their words. He began to feel nauseas, realising what a fool he really had been. All this time, he'd been hoping that there was a chance, even a small one, that he would be able to convince Lydia to marry him. He had a small hope that her mother and father would allow it, that they would welcome him into the family. It had been a foolish hope, a fantasy.

He had the imagination of a writer, but not in the way he would have liked. Rather, he had simply believed his own lies and thought that there was still a chance for his own happiness when there was nothing at all to suggest that he would have the love he so desperately craved.

Even if Lydia had cared for him, even if he had not misread the glances or the shy smiles, she was bound to marry another man. And why wouldn't she want to? As much as Darius detested men like the Duke of Moreland, he knew that this man had a reputation for his appearance and his charm. He really did get the attention of many women. There was no reason Lydia shouldn't like him as well as any other woman did.

And here they were, Lord and Lady Seabrook, discussing the marriage with such clarity of fact that he had to admit the truth even when it broke his heart to do so.

Lydia was going to be married. She would become a duchess and she would forget all about him. Why hadn't she said anything to him? Although it was reasonable that a woman of her station might not share this fact with her tutor, Darius had thought they were becoming friends. Had that, too, been a foolish thought? Was he as mad as his brother said he was?

Yes, Alistair was right. Darius was only going to get hurt.

He didn't want to listen to the conversation anymore. It was too heartbreaking. Instead, Darius rushed to the library and put his satchel down, trying to steady his breathing so that he would not look panicked when Lydia entered the room. But as he considered it, as he thought about the lesson and how he would have to try to endure it and be a cheerful tutor for her, Darius realised that it was simply impossible. He could not reasonably try to teach her anything more when his heart longed to be close to her and to tell her how much he loved her. It wasn't fair that he should have to read her heroes and know that they were based off the qualities of Lord Moreland. He didn't want to fall more in love with her upon reading her words and

find that he was further stuck in his affections.

Instead, Darius decided he would have to resign from his position. It was the only way he could bear to move on. Otherwise, he was going to be miserable. He could not face Lydia each and every day or even think about her when he knew that their time together was coming to a close as she was preparing to marry the Duke.

The only way to protect his heart was to distance himself from her.

With that in mind, Darius stood again and started to put the books he had brought back in his satchel. He left Lydia's manuscript on the table so that she could have the copy returned after he'd taken a portion of it the night before in preparation of their discussion.

But just as he started to walk towards the door, a striking figure entered the doorway. She had strawberry-gold hair and large, hazel eyes. And she made his heart burst.

"Darius? Is something wrong? You look as if there is someone come to send you away," she said with a strained laugh.

He looked down and fidgeted with the strap on his satchel, not knowing what to say to her.

"Lyd—I mean, Miss Seabrook," he began, "I fear that I must speak with you about something. It is not what I might have wanted to say, but it must be said nonetheless."

"Why are you calling me that? And what is it? What is the matter?" she asked, drawing near to him.

"I wanted to tell you something. It is not easy to say and I do not wish to upset you," he said, keeping his voice low. He was terribly nervous, but even more worried that Lord Seabrook would hear him. What if Lord Seabrook figured out why Darius was leaving? That would be awful for his reputation.

"Come," Lydia said, taking his hand and guiding him to the back of the library behind one of the shelves. It was obvious that she understood his hesitancy and fear of being overheard.

Darius stood there, unable to look her in the eyes and deeply concerned that all of this was about to fall apart. He wasn't sure if he

could really say what was on his mind without confessing everything in his heart.

“Please, Darius. Tell me what happened. What are you so upset about?” she asked.

“Miss Seabrook, I have truly enjoyed this time that we have worked together. You are an excellent pupil and I have seen your work come so far. You must be very proud of yourself,” he said.

“Why are you saying this? You sound as if you are going to...are you leaving?” she asked.

“I know that it is likely to upset you, but I fear that I have no other choice. You see, I would love to stay, but there are many reasons for which I cannot and—”

“Please,” she said with earnest, cutting him off in the middle of his sentence. “You cannot do this. You cannot leave. If anyone understands what my hopes and dreams are, it is you. I cannot abide the thought that you might leave me, that you might abandon me. What has caused this? Have I done something wrong?”

“No!” he said quickly. “No, you have done nothing wrong. It is my own fault that I must leave. You are a wonderful young woman and an excellent pupil, as I said. I wish that I did not need to depart, but I have no other choice,” he told her.

“But why? You must give me a reason. I cannot bear the thought of you going and not telling me why,” she said.

“Lydia, I cannot tell you,” he said.

“But that is not fair! Surely you must. You cannot leave me without giving me a reason,” she demanded with tears in her eyes.

“Surely you already know,” he said, softly, looking her in the eye at last.

For a long moment, they did not move or speak, only looked at one another with hearts full of hope and wishes unspoken. At last, however, Lydia spoke again.

“I wish to hear it from you,” she said.

“Please, do not make me say something that is only going to get me into trouble,” he said.

“In trouble with whom?” she asked.

“Will you not be angry with me?” Darius asked.

“Of course not. I only wish to hear you tell me why you are willing to leave me after everything that has happened. You are the reason I am able to write so well now. You are the reason my life has had meaning and I have felt joy of late,” she said.

He nodded, understanding the importance of telling her the truth. Darius knew he had to be honest.

“Very well. The truth is, I am in love with you. I cannot bear to see you marry another man. I cannot live with you abandoning all of this. For both of us, I think it is best that I leave now and do not come back,” he said.

With that, Darius took a step away from her.

“Wait,” she said, taking him by the arm. “You cannot leave until I have told you why I am so desperate for you to stay.”

Darius hated to admit how badly he wanted to know. He imagined she would probably simply tell him that it was because he had helped her with her work. But he needed to know, nevertheless.

“Very well then. Why?” he asked.

“Because I love you as well. Because I cannot imagine how I could go on without you now that I know the happiness you bring into my life. There is no future for me in which you are absent,” she declared.

It was sudden and shocking and wonderful all at the same time. Darius couldn’t believe that she had been so open, that she felt the same way he did. Nothing could have made him happier than learning that Lydia loved him and suddenly all the worries melted away.

“I have never been happier than in this moment,” Lydia said.

“Nor have I. To think that I have your heart? That is something I

never expected,” he said with a gentle laugh.

The tenderness between them was palpable. Darius felt her heart and he longed to share his in return. As they stood there, in the shadows of the bookshelves, he knew that everything in his world was about to change.

“What about your marriage to the Duke of Moreland?”

“The Duke?” she scoffed. “I shall do whatever I am able to avoid the union. I have told him that I will not marry him. I know that my father wishes for me to marry him in a year, once I have finished this manuscript, but I have already expressed my refusal and shall do so again if I must.”

“But what are they going to do if you refuse? The Duke will be furious and your father might cast you out,” Darius said.

“I do not care what they say or what they do. My only fear is that you will be in trouble if they find out. We cannot confess this aloud,” Lydia said.

“I know. We have no choice but to hide our love. There is little we can do but remain silent for the time being and hope that it works out in time for us to be with one another,” Darius said.

“Indeed. My father would relieve you of your duties. He would refuse to give you a reference. I cannot allow that to happen. You are not the only one who relies on your wages,” she said, acknowledging the fact that Alistair and his family were also in need of the money Darius made.

He was so grateful that she understood the need, that she cared enough about his family to try and protect them. It was another reminder that she was nothing like he had expected when he first came to work here, when he first imagined that she would be the same, spoiled child as all the others.

But Lydia was willing to sacrifice being together right away for the sake of his family. She was willing to wait until they were in a better situation. But Darius was still afraid of risking the chance that she might be forced into a marriage sooner. And that was something he could not bear.

"We must be cautious, but I will not stand by if you are forced to marry that man," Darius said.

"I shall refuse, no matter what. You are the only man I am willing to spend my life with. And once we can figure out a plan, we will do so. But until then, we must only be seen working on the book and we must continue our lessons as normal," she said.

"Of course. I want nothing but to stay here with you, to tell you of my love, but if your mother and father catch us together in any way that is not involving your studies, I shall be sent away in a hurry. I understand it, of course. They would not wish for you to be fraternising with your tutor," Darius said.

"Come," Lydia replied, smiling as she led him to sit with her at the table.

Darius understood at once that she was going to dive right into their lesson, to ensure that there was no reason for her father to be suspicious of them. And if Lydia was able to do this with ease, Darius knew that he must do the same.

"Very well," he said. "What have you been working on?"

"I actually took the evening to work on a small scene for a different piece. I know that we must do a good deal of work on the novel I am trying to get published, but I wanted you to read through this."

Darius took the paper in his hands and Lydia leaned forward and spoke in a hushed tone.

"Now that you know how I feel about you, I do believe this piece will make a good deal more sense," she said.

At once, he began to read the words upon the page.

Although she knew that she could never reveal her heart, Anna whispered her thoughts into the night. No one but the moon overhead could hear them, but at least she had said them aloud.

And yet, Anna had the strangest sensation that, one day, Mr. Wilder would know the truth. One day, even if she never spoke a word, she imagined he would come up to her and ask for her hand.

If the day were never to come, Anna was certain she could not go on. But if Mr. Wilder had seen her heart and if he thought it worthy, she knew that he would make the decision to fight for her, to choose her, and to give Anna all the love he had to offer.

“It is beautiful,” Darius said, looking up from the short piece. “Is there no more?”

“Not yet,” she replied. “I am still deciding what to do with it. Of course, I do wish to finish it, but it was simply that scene which came to my mind a few evenings ago after I found myself on the balcony, whispering my secrets to the moon.”

“And has the moon been kind with them? Has she kept your confidence?” Darius asked.

Lydia gave him the sweetest, most contented expression.

“You are here, are you not?” she asked by way of answer.

Darius would have done anything for the sake of their time together. All he wanted was to marry Lydia and, until that day came, he would wait and live in the hope that it would soon come to pass.

Chapter Eighteen

It had been a week since Darius had confessed to Lydia that he loved her and each day, her heart fluttered from morning until nightfall. She thought only of the excitement she felt, knowing that they would one day be together and live happily. All Lydia could do was ignore and try to forget the obligations her family wished to force upon her.

Since the profession of their love for one another, Lydia had enjoyed every moment she was able to spend with Darius. As they found excuses to leave the townhouse together, as they found a way to have privacy and get away from the prying eyes of her mother and father, of the housekeeper, of the noblemen and women of London society, Lydia was learning more about life and love and how it could translate into her work.

There was never a day with him when she wasn't full of excitement about what tomorrow might bring. Saturday and Sunday were utterly miserable, knowing that she would not see Darius. It was those days when she would scour the library to find the poems he had hidden for her.

Each time he had written her one, he'd told her just before leaving so she could hunt them down before she risked her mother or father finding them first. Already, she had a collection of four poems written to her by Darius and she would lie back in her bed and read them each night before bed.

One night, she indulged in her favourite, reading the words on the page with her heart full of wonder and joy.

How sweet the sound of her voice!

How lovely is she with grace!

I see her and I rejoice,

To behold such a fair face!
And yet I understand,
That our love is but a tower,
That each of us must climb,
At every passing hour.
I wonder at her heart,
And I seek to know her more.
Never has a woman been,
So easy to adore.
And yet, my heart besets me,
As I fight to reach her still.
There are days that shall yet pass,
Before we return stronger still.
And when I at last hold her,
Safely in my arms,
She will know that all around us now,
Society disarms.
It cannot hold us back,
We shall triumph in the end,
For she is not only my dearest love,
But also my dearest friend.

The poem melted Lydia's heart. She could hardly believe that Darius thought this way about her. Did he really care so much as to think of

her as his dearest friend? Did he know that she was not simply a woman to be loved, but one to truly be cherished and cared for? Never before had she known a man to think of a woman in this way. Never before had she felt such a gift.

That night as she lay in bed, Lydia could hardly wait to show Darius the piece she had been working on, to show him her progress. But when Tuesday came around, Darius had another adventure planned for them, going out in London to see new places.

“Farewell, Mother and Father. We shall be home in a few hours,” Lydia said.

“Be careful and do not get lost anywhere that a lady of your station ought not to be seen,” her father said.

“Certainly,” she replied before rushing out of the room and following Darius to a coach.

Once they were inside, she was eager to learn where he was taking her.

“I thought we could go to the wharfs and observe from a distance,” he said.

“The wharfs?” Lydia asked, somewhat startled. She was anxious, knowing that it was a very rough area. Still, she agreed to this spot, trusting that Darius would take excellent care of her and not let her get [into any trouble.](#)^[24]

They arrived and stayed in the coach as Lydia stared out the window. There, she saw the urchin children, searching along the water to find anything of value. The men and women in their dirty clothing paid them little mind and she felt a tug on her heart as she considered their plight.

“I can’t imagine how difficult it must be for those children. How can they survive?” she asked.

“They barely do. But that is another element of humanity that must be considered,” Darius said. “That is something more that must be felt.”

“I cannot help but grieve for them. Is that grief what you wish for me to include in my work?” she asked.

“You do not need to include every emotion, only be aware of them and know when to use them,” Darius said, as if speaking of something more than just her writing.

Lydia thought about their future and the grief that they might come to face if they could not figure out the best thing to do so they might be together. She worried that there would come a day when she would have to make a choice and it would be a difficult one, perhaps one that would tear her away from her family.

“Now, I think we should go somewhere a bit brighter. Not only can you note the contrast between there and here, but you may also have some time to be at peace after having observed these children,” Darius said.

Lydia wasn't sure where he would take her, but when the coach stopped at Covent Garden, she was surprised that Darius had chosen this spot.

“You know, we will be seen by many people here,” she noted.

“I know,” he replied, gently taking her hand and giving it a squeeze. “And because of that, I understand that I must walk slightly behind you and practically grovel as a servant would. But I am willing to do so because this, too, is a place where emotions are on display and may be felt. You need not be stuck in mourning and you must also see how the classes fare.”

“Yes, I suppose you are right. Still, I hate knowing that we cannot be open about our love and we have try and hide it even more in places like this,” Lydia said.

“It is all right. It does not mean that I have to hide my love when we are alone and it does not mean that my heart must shy away from you,” he said.

They got out of the coach and began to walk, observing the people around them. Lydia noticed that there was a coach near theirs with a large, bearded man staring out the window at her. She was quite unnerved by his presence and wondered why he was watching her. But he looked away quickly and she realised that he was just like so many other men who observed her only because of her appearance.

“Are you all right?” Darius asked, noting her change in demeanour.

“Yes, I am all right,” she grumbled with indignation. “I am just tired of having to accept that oftentimes I am viewed only for my external appearance and I must suffer the objectification of gentlemen.”

Darius laughed lightly and Lydia flashed him a dark expression, unable to conceal her anger that he would laugh at her plight.

“No, please do not misunderstand me,” he said, holding up his hands in surrender. “I think it is awful. I am only laughing because I cannot understand why so many men are this foolish. Despite my many flaws, I never did understand why others would be so distracted merely by a woman’s beauty when she might have astounding intellect upon which they could focus.”

“I wish that I did not have so much experience with men like this, but I do. I have always hated it and I do now as well,” she said.

“Well, we must move on. There is no reason to be wounded by it. There is a man walking just so slightly behind you who would fall to your feet in an instant and beg you to be his wife if he thought the time was right,” Darius said.

Lydia couldn’t help but smile to herself, loving that he was being so open about his hopes for the future. He was incredible and the way he moved her heart was beyond anything she had ever experienced before. There were days when it seemed to Lydia that she would be happiest if she could run away that very moment and live out the rest of her life with Darius and no one would even know that she had gone.

They would pass her in the street and think she was someone else entirely because she was so happy now.

But that dream was not yet within her grasp. She would need to ensure that everything was settled with Darius and his family before they could make the decision to speak with her mother and father and try to arrange a marriage between them. And if they were to refuse, she would have no choice but to run away from home and never return.

They continued walking through the garden and Darius had Lydia take notes on things she observed, particularly about the interactions

she saw between people.

“What about that couple up ahead? See the chaperone? What do you think is happening?” Darius asked.

Lydia watched them for a moment and her heart ached for the chaperone.

“It would appear that the chaperone is also in love with the gentleman, that she would like to be the object of his affection,” she said.

“And?” Darius pushed.

Lydia saw the fine young lady continue walking and the gentleman looked back at the chaperone who was trailing behind. His eyes held compassion and longing.

“They have had an affair,” Lydia said.

“Indeed. Perhaps it was only a moment or perhaps it has been happening for quite some time. But the gentleman is in love with the chaperone rather than the young woman he is courting. It is very sad for all three of them,” Darius said.

“Yes, it is,” Lydia replied, hurt on behalf of the ignorant young woman who believed that she was being courted by a man who loved her. She hoped that the man and the chaperone were decent people, that they would not betray the young lady but they would either separate themselves from one another or confess their love and be together. As it was, no one would end this happily.

“You should write a scene that goes between each of their thoughts. Or, perhaps, you could write a scene of what you expect for their future. It may not be applicable to your current work, but it is always helpful to put these things into practice. An entire novel may form from whatever you put to paper,” Darius said.

“Indeed, I suppose you are correct. I shall do so when we return home,” she promised.

“Very well. And, having said that, I think we ought to return after all. We have been gone for quite some time and I do not wish for your father to be angry with me,” Darius said.

Lydia turned to him and looked in his eyes with joy on her face.

“It is not avoiding my father’s anger that you wish for,” she said.

“Oh? Then what is it?” Darius asked in amusement.

“You simply wish to go back to the coach with me so that we do not have to maintain this formality,” she teased.

Darius leaned forward ever so slightly, glancing around to be sure that no one was watching them.

“Perhaps you are correct, my love. But one day, when we are able to figure out how to do it, we are going to be together and we shall have nothing at all to fret about. I will be full of joy for loving you all the more and you will be at peace, knowing there is no need to hide what we share,” he said.

Lydia’s pulse raced in her veins and she couldn’t believe the happiness that thought gave her. She needed only to be patient. Soon enough, she and Darius could be together. Soon enough, they would spend their lives with one another.

They made their way back towards the coach and Lydia saw the man once more, staring at her through his window. This time, however, he quickly pulled the curtain closed from the inside and hid his face. Lydia told herself that it had all been her imagination, that he hadn’t been watching her but rather the happenings of the park or, perhaps he was waiting for someone.

All of that made a good deal more sense. If he was, however, attracted to her, Lydia had dreadful news for him. She would never cater to the interests of a man in a coach in a park. She was already trying to refuse one man whilst hiding her relationship with another. Her heart could only hold so much affection and it was all reserved for Darius.

She loved his poetry, his charm, his intellect, and his loyalty. But most of all, she loved the fact that he saw her for who she truly was[25] [26]. He understood her dreams and he believed in them. There was so much that had passed between them already, but nothing was so grand as the time they had shared together with his family and Lydia hoped that one day, they would be her family as well.

Chapter Nineteen

Lydia handed Darius the stack of pages. She could hardly believe that it was finished, but there it was. The draft of her manuscript.

“My goodness, you have completed it? I am astonished,” Darius said.

“I know that it has not taken as long as I expected, but this is still just an early draft. With your help, I was able to rewrite so much of it and then finish the rest, but I expect you shall still have a great deal of edits for me to make,” Lydia said with a laugh.

“Well, that is what I was hired to do, was it not? Make you better?” he reminded her.

“You have not read this entire section,” she said, showing him where she had marked from the pages about a quarter of the way through the story until the end.

“Yes, I was not even aware that you had finished the plot,” Darius said.

“And I made a few other changes throughout that you have not seen, but if you are willing to read that final section first, perhaps I can begin the edits while you read through from the beginning,” Lydia said.

Darius looked at her curiously and she would not meet his gaze.

“What is it?” he asked her.

“Nothing,” she replied, too quickly.

“Tell me,” he said, softly. Darius touched her arm gently with the back of his hand and she finally looked up at him.

“I am not sure if you will like the ending. I fear that it is too...cliche,”

she said.

“Lydia, your story is about love and the human condition. There are few ways to end it that would convince a publisher to put it in print. If you end it tragically, the tragedy must be felt by the reader in such a way that they would choose to be hurt by you again with another novel. But if you end it happily, you are quite guaranteed that they will read another,” Darius said.

Lydia was relieved by that, knowing that she ended her tale with the hero and heroine living happily together. In many ways, she was writing the story because she did not yet know how her own love would turn out and she thought that this was one way of giving herself a good ending. Still, she feared that Darius would not enjoy it or that he would find it too predictable and shallow.

He sat and began to read and make little notes. With each page that he read, he handed the notes to Lydia so that she could immediately begin working on them. She was more than ready, excited for the chance to improve her work and continue into the next draft. After all, she had given so much thought and attention to this piece that it was certainly time to move things along.

“What do you mean by this, here? She is too surprised?” Lydia asked, pointing out one of his remarks.

“She is almost surprised before he even gives her a reason to be. I simply want you to show more of a progression in her emotions. That is all. It is an easy thing to fix,” he said.

Mary’s brows raised in surprise as he walked towards her.

“I adore you,” he said. “I adore you as I have never adored a woman in all my life.”

“Because her brows are raised?” she asked.

“Yes, that as well. I also believe you must insert a bit of subtlety to his words before he tells her how he feels. Perhaps give some build up as most men would not declare it with such readiness,” he said, grinning sheepishly at Lydia.

She nodded and returned to her work, adding more to the scene and then went along with the next, busily ensuring that Mary had a

gradual response to the comments made by her brother, Victor, when he shared that he had fallen in love with Mary's nemesis.

By the end of the day, Lydia had made dozens of minor changes, but Darius had given her nothing too serious or time-consuming to rewrite. At last, he put down the final page and looked up at Lydia with tears in his eyes.

"You have accomplished something truly incredible," he said. His eyes were bright and full of excitement for her and Lydia was thrilled to know that he saw such promise in her work despite the many things she'd needed to work on. To realise that a man of his skill and intelligence saw her abilities was a great joy and blessing. And yet, she still could not believe that he really felt this way. What had she done to earn his admiration in her work?

"What? What do you mean?" she asked, breathlessly, her voice shaking in anticipation of his reaction.

"I am astonished by how beautiful the ending is, Lydia. The fact that you had him rescue her just before the wedding and the death of emotion when he killed Richard to stop Richard from killing Mary? It was incredibly romantic and a perfect climax. The reader will never be able to put the book down and, once they finish, they will be grieved that it is over. That is a difficult thing to accomplish," Darius said.

"I am so happy that you approve. I was terrified that you would not like it or that you would think I had done a poor job of expressing the depth since that was the primary thing I was meant to work on," she said.

"You have grown dramatically in your abilities and in such a short period of time. I urge you to finish going through what I have given you today. I am going to start reading through from the beginning and, each day, we will go through it little by little. I believe that we will be able to finish the edits in a matter of weeks. At that point, we will be able to present it to a publisher, who will then request more edits of course," he said with a laugh.

"Yes, I am ready for that," Lydia said with excitement. "You really believe there is a chance it will be published?"

Darius flashed a coy grin.

"I have not wanted to say anything just yet, but I actually have a plan in mind," he said.

"What do you mean? What sort of plan?" she asked.

"I have a friend, John Banks, who worked at Whitaker and Pruitt Publishers. I have already spoken with him about the plot of your story and he is interested, Lydia. He has told me that, once the book is polished, we may bring it down for him to have a look at. If he believes that the quality is high enough, they might even be willing to publish your book," Darius revealed.

Lydia was astonished and for a moment, she was frozen in place with her lips parted in surprise, her eyes wide, her brows slightly knit together with the vague sense of worry that came with success. Was it possible? Was it true that she was good enough to be published or was she simply preparing for rejection? She could hardly believe it.

"Do you really mean it? There is a chance that I am soon to be published?" she asked.

"Indeed. He did say that you will have to choose a man's name, but we have already discussed that. I know it is terrible, but there are so many who would refuse to purchase a book written by a woman and they know that the only way to sell is to pretend that you are a man," Darius said, apologetically.

"I know, I know," she said, waving the thought away. It was unfair, but that was the way of the world. Her mother and grandmother had been forced to do the same and although there were many women who were out there, writing and enjoying the fruits of their labour, none of them were able to share their true identity. It was simply the way of things.

"Nevertheless, we will do whatever we can to ensure that you are published and that it is done soon. Let us focus on getting everything precisely where it needs to be so that I am able to get it to John. And once it is in his hands, he will tell us if it is ready for the next round of edits or if it needs more work before a publisher will even consider touching it," Darius said.

"Thank you, Darius," Lydia said, throwing her arms around his neck. She couldn't believe everything that he had done for her. Not only had

he shown her what love truly felt like, but he was the reason that she had grown in her skill and was now so close to the dream she'd harboured for such a long time. The day was so soon to come that she would accomplish the goal she had set out for long ago.

"I promise you, Lydia, this is only the beginning," he said. "Soon enough, you are going to be a famous author. Your mother will be so proud of you and your grandmother will be smiling down upon you, knowing that she led you on this path and gave you the hope that you might one day be able to accomplish all that she was able to."

"I could not do any of it without you," she replied. "And, because of that, we must consider what this means for us as well."

They both grew quiet for a moment, each lost to their own thoughts and considerations.

"What do you think it means for us?" Darius asked her, looking with curious eyes to await her response.

"Well, I trust that my father will at least give me time for you to help me through the editing process for the publisher. But I know that my hopes have been somewhat defeated by getting this far so soon. I was promised a year and it has been less than two months," she said.

"And the Duke has not found another woman to pursue as you had hoped," Darius said.

"Exactly. I thought that he would have moved on to someone else by now. Instead, he is simply lurking by. Now and then, he comes to eat with us and it is always the same thing. He asks for a moment alone with me. I reject him. He tells me how hurt he is. And then, I hear my father tell him that I will come around once I have let go of this folly," she said, nodding to the book.

"Well, I expect that he is not going to give up just because you are published. More than likely, he will still want to marry you and your father will continue to encourage it," Darius said.

"Yes, that is my expectation as well. There is not enough time for us to send the Duke towards another woman. There is nothing we can do but hope that he decides not to marry me. I wish that I had told my father I wanted my independence no matter what once the book was published. I fear that he never quite agreed to that, only to giving me

this season,” she said, thinking back to how she had begged for this.

Her father had known that Lydia wanted freedom if she was published, but since they had begun the arrangement, he seemed to act as though she could have this year and then marry regardless of the outcome. There was so much that still confused Lydia as she had once believed that she had been clear and was now realising she had only managed to delay the inevitable.

“Perhaps, once I am published, we may just tell my father. We may tell him that we wish to marry, to be together. He will be upset at first, but in time he will understand,” Lydia said.

Darius looked at her with anguish in his eyes. He clearly wanted to do that, but feared the outcome. Lydia, likewise, feared the result, but she was trying to cling to any hope she could find.

“Very well,” she said, shaking her head after the idea she had only just voiced. “We shall have to think of something else.”

“I want to marry you, Lydia. More than anything. But I am not yet sure how I can possibly provide for you. And even if you publish this book, it will not give you enough money to live on your own or for us to marry without the support of your family,” he said.

“And if we marry, you will not get a good reference and your name will be slandered throughout the city and no man will hire you for their children, lest they fear that you will cause their children to hate the ton. I understand,” she said.

They were truly in a dreadful predicament, but there was no clear path to take in the meantime. All Lydia could do was hope and pray that Lord Moreland would forget about her. And it could happen, of course.

There was no bond or connection between them. He clearly only wanted to marry her because of her appearance. There was no other possibility, nothing else she had that he might want. After all, why would a wealthy, handsome duke care about a woman like her?

Chapter Twenty

Lord Moreland

“They stayed at the townhouse today, Your Grace,” Charles said, standing in the doorway.

“And you saw nothing that took place between them?” Lord Moreland asked, taking a puff from his cigar.[\[27\]](#)

“Nothing, Your Grace. They were not near the windows,” Charles replied.

“Well then, that means they were likely hiding something. I do not know what is worse, being forced to marry a woman who wishes for a career or being forced to marry a woman who would rather marry her tutor than a duke,” Lord Moreland grumbled.

“I am sure that she will come around in time and see that you are the better option, Your Grace,” Charles said.

“Oh, hush now. You are dismissed,” he replied, waving Charles away.

The Duke moved to the large, leather chair by the fire. His study was grand and elaborate, beautiful in every way. He had spared no expense on the finery and thought that it was more than enough to keep him happy.

He had been wrong.

Now, he was living with the consequences of his actions, realising that he was going to have to try and convince that silly woman to marry him, even if he didn’t care about her. And as Charles had been spying on her, it had become clear that she was spending more time with her tutor than needed to be done.

Why was her father not paying attention to this? Was he really so blind? Or was the Duke overreacting? Was it possible that Miss

Seabrook was actually just trying to pursue some nonsensical dream without a care in the world?

He thought about his plight for a long while, wondering what more he could do. Was there any way around this? Was it possible that he could avoid having to marry her? Surely there was an option he had not yet considered.

The sound of a coach outside caused the Duke to sit upright. He heard the knock at the door echoing through the halls and the low rumble of Charles's voice as he allowed someone inside.

The Duke sighed, not wanting to see anyone in that moment. He was too ashamed of his own circumstance and the fact that he was having to marry the Seabrook girl. It was a time for grieving, not a time for guests.

Nevertheless, when the door to the study opened and he saw the Magistrate enter, the Duke of Moreland swallowed hard, frightened by the sudden presence of someone he truly didn't wish to see.

"Ah, hello," the Duke said, awkwardly. He stood and tried not to look frightened, but immediately struck a defensive position behind the large chair.

"Your Grace, you know why I have come. This is important. You must figure out what you are going to do. You asked me to give you time, to try and help you with all your debts, but you are running out of time now. The men you owe money to are beginning to come forward," the Magistrate warned.

The Duke of Moreland thought for a moment, remembering all those times he had asked for money. He had convinced the men to be discreet, to not share that he had gambled away much of his own wealth or that he was running out of money entirely. Those men knew that the Duke was important, they knew that his reputation could not be ruined if this all became public.

But right now, his only choice was to marry a woman for the sake of her dowry and hope that he could get the money sooner rather than later.

"They promised to be patient with me. I will pay them," the Duke said, casually. He wanted to behave as though the money would be

easy to come by. As soon as one man sniffed out his desperation, it was all over for him. Everyone would know that he could not be trusted to repay the debts. They would all think that he had been a waste of their resources. And then, where would he be?

“You must pay them soon. The debtor’s prison awaits you, Your Grace. You need to be prepared for the fact that there are many men who will be wanting to send you there. You owe more than enough to pay for their needs and they have families to look after,” the Magistrate warned.

“Yes, well, why have you bothered to come here? Just to tell me all of this? If you are not going to arrest me right now, then I suggest you leave my home at once. I am not going to the debtor’s prison just because a man who owes me has not paid when he ought to have,” the Duke said, thinking of Lord Seabrook and how eager the Duke was for that money.

“How do you intend to get the money to repay these men? I do hope that you are not planning to gamble for it. If you lose anything more, you will be in chains by tomorrow,” the Magistrate said.

“Chains?” the Duke scoffed. “That is ridiculous. They are not so cruel at that place. All that will happen is I would be carried away and given nice rooms there. That is all. And I will be perfectly fine because it is not going to happen. I have a man who is going to pay me a large sum very soon. I will see if I can convince him to give it to me sooner than we arranged.”

“And how soon have you arranged it for?” the Magistrate asked, impatiently.

“Soon,” the Duke hissed. “You do not need to know all of my affairs. I have told you that I will have the money soon. It will go directly to the themes I owe and then you and I shall have no further business. You will not come here with your threats and I will never see the inside of your prison. Now, I must tell you again that you need to leave.”

“And I will tell you again that if you do not find the money soon, I will be here within the next few weeks and you will never get away with this,” he replied.

With that, the Magistrate turned around and left the study.

The Duke of Moreland looked up at the ceiling and thought about every decision he'd made that for him to this point. Yes, he loved the niceties of his home and the way he lived. He loved having a house filled with maids and footmen and whatever else he might need from day to day.

He loved knowing that everyone made their assumptions about him based on his appearance and his title, thinking he must be wealthy in addition.

But fear was tightening its grip around his chest and the Duke realised that he needed to hurry things along. With a sudden horror, it was becoming clear that he could not wait a full year to marry Lydia. He could not allow her to go through with this book nonsense.

If she continued, she might find success. It was a silly thing anyway, a woman trying to be a writer. But if she did have some luck, if she managed to convince anyone to read her work, she might never be willing to marry him. And if that were to happen, he would not get the dowry and he would be sent to the prison.

Indeed, he needed to persuade her to marry him sooner than planned and, in order to do that, he would have to try and be a good deal more charming.

The Duke had seen how unimpressed she was any time he tried to impress her. She had not enjoyed spending time with him or getting to know him better. She appeared to think that he was arrogant. That was the first thing he would need to change about himself.

All he had to do was soften his expression, look at her tenderly. He would need to smile more and compliment her without adding his own success. He would have to behave as though he was encouraging her dreams.

The Duke was not sure he could do any of this. He had never tried before and it seemed painful to attempt this sort of nicety rather than follow his usual methods of convincing a woman to like him.

But there was nothing more he could say or do. For now, he had to woo her.

"Charles!" the Duke called with anger in his voice.

Charles came running, his large, bearded face sagging when he reached the door.

“Yes, Your Grace?”

“I need you to send my card around to Lord Seabrook. Tell him that I will be there tomorrow for dinner if he is willing to have me. You must mention that I would like to speak with him again about the timeline we have discussed and that I would like a moment with his daughter to apologise for my previous behaviour,” he said, trusting that this was the best way to move forward.

“Yes, Your Grace. Is there anything else you wish to say?” Charles asked.

The Duke thought about it for a moment, thinking Lord Seabrook was the only one he needed to convince. Then, after a moment, he realised that Miss Seabrook was a little bit different from most women. She was the sort of woman who might want him to actually consider her. It was a silly notion for a woman to want a man to think of her opinion and hopes, but that was exactly the kind of woman she was.

“Yes, actually,” he said. “There is something else. I want you to also write a letter for Miss Seabrook. Say that I am thinking of her book and I hope that she is doing well. Say that I look forward to reading it and I am sorry for having dismissed the idea before.”

“Oh...yes, Your Grace,” Charles said with confusion in his voice.

“What is it? You do not think it is a good thing to say?”

“On the contrary, Your Grace. It is very generous of you to say that. It is not something she would expect,” he said.

“Exactly,” he mumbled. “I need her to see that I am not the man she thinks I am. She does not like the man she believes me to be so I have to show her that I am someone else.”

“And will you be able to carry this new man into your interactions with her?” Charles asked with trepidation.

“You mean am I going to be myself around her and say the opposite of what is in this letter? I shall try to be consistent, but you and I both know that I am not skilled in the art of sensitivity. I want a woman

who will behave as I tell her to. This is a woman who is dramatically different from that,” he said.

“Then why are you so determined to marry her?” Charles asked.

“Are you questioning me?” the Duke challenged.

“No, Your Grace. Forgive me. It is only that I wish for you to be happy and marry someone you want to marry,” he said.

“Yes, well, as it happens, this woman has something else I want. Something I need. And, for that, I am willing to do whatever it takes,” he said.

The Duke knew how to get nearly any woman he wanted and he was not going to [allow a marriage of convenience to stop that. He had a plan and he was not going to give it up lightly. This was his chance and he would take it.](#)

Anything was better than ending up destitute and humiliated in prison. All he had to do now was manipulate some foolish girl into thinking he loved her, into thinking he could give her the world.

Meanwhile, he would take it for himself. [\[28\]](#)

Chapter Twenty-One

Lydia dreaded her visit with the Duke that evening, every bit as much as she always did. He was to come for dinner and, knowing that she had no ability to get out of entertaining him, she waited in the parlour until his arrival and greeted him as sweetly as she knew she must.

“Miss Seabrook, you look wonderful,” he said, bowing and then standing to full height and casting a wolfish gaze in her direction. Lydia looked to her mother and father but quickly realised that they were not paying them any mind as the Duke and Lydia greeted one another. It was almost as though they were trying to give the two privacy despite being in the same room, much to Lydia’s dismay.

“Th-thank you, Your Grace,” Lydia said, keeping her eyes down. She couldn’t bear that gaze from him and did all she could to try and ignore it. There was nothing about the Duke that she wanted for her life and all she could hope for was the chance to get out of this soon enough. If she managed to run away with Darius, she could be happy.

“Well, I do hope that you know how much I admire you, Miss Seabrook. But I do not wish to say anything that might make you uncomfortable. I know that you still have time before we marry, however, I wish you knew how desperately I wish we could shorten that time,” he said.

Lydia looked at her father, who was clearly surprised by the blatant statement. It was not the sort of thing that might be said in such simple terms, but Lord Moreland wasn’t the sort of man who held back his thoughts. One of the things Lydia disliked about him most was how comfortable he was in stating whatever was on his mind and whatever it was that he wanted.

“Your Grace, I have spoken with my daughter about my hope that she would consider this as well,” Lydia’s father said. “However, I did make her a promise. I cannot go back on my word.”

“With all due respect, Lord Seabrook, you did go back on your word when I asked to marry your daughter soon. However, that is all behind us now,” the Duke of Moreland said, his gaze shifting from wolfish to cutting and bitter.

Lydia’s father was silenced, but the Duke smiled and acted as though nothing was amiss, as if he had not just spoken harshly at all.

“You are correct, Your Grace. Thank you for expressing your displeasure in this circumstance. As you know, I have been speaking with my daughter about it and will continue to do so. Surely you can see, Lydia, how wonderful the Duke is. I trust that you will consider his request,” her father said.

An awkward silence descended, but the maid came just in time to tell them all that dinner was served. They made their way to the dining hall and Lord Moreland remained very close to her as they went along.

“I apologise if I appeared harsh, Miss Seabrook. I am so eager to marry you, I do not know what comes over me at times,” he said, appearing truly contrite. Lydia didn’t trust him, no matter how apologetic he seemed.

“I understand, but you must be patient. If you truly wish to marry me, you will be willing to give me this time to pursue my interest,” she said.

“Yes, of course,” he replied with a terse smile.

Lydia could tell that he was trying to concede to her wishes, but that it was very difficult for him. Although she didn’t mean to be rude, she needed him to understand that she would not be swayed simply because he was trying to convince her to do something she didn’t want. No matter how powerful the Duke of Moreland was, it was not enough to impress Lydia. All she could think about was Darius, the man who truly meant something to her.

They took their seats at the table and Lydia’s father and mother led the polite conversation, which the Duke engaged in easily. Despite the difficult beginning of the evening, Lydia noticed how smoothly he could transition into charming others. He laughed at all of her father’s humour and complimented her mother’s taste in decoration and the quality of the food.

Indeed, he may have tried to manipulate earlier in the evening, but there was something about this, something about his ease of conversation, that Lydia found so much more threatening.

“Lord Seabrook, you must meet my uncle. I am sure the two of you would have a wonderful time going on a hunt. Perhaps I might arrange it for the three of us?” the Duke offered, once Lydia’s father had shared a story about his last hunting adventure.

“I should be honoured, Your Grace. I can only imagine what it would be like to hunt with such grand men,” her father said.

Lydia’s pasted on smile began to falter. She hated how her father was trying so hard to keep the Duke happy and even more distressed that they already seemed to think that Lydia was committed to marrying the Duke. Every time a reference was made to Lydia finishing her time of writing, her heart sunk. She understood now that all she had done was delay the inevitable. No one intended to give her a true chance at independence. This was all a matter of how long it would be until she was forced to marry a man she despised.

As dinner came to a conclusion, Lydia followed her mother and father to the parlour, along with the Duke. They were to sit and enjoy a nice cup of tea with biscuits as usual, but, as they went along, her father paused.

“Your Grace, would you like a moment with my daughter? I do understand the importance of your time together, especially because we are forcing a delay in the marriage,” her father offered.

Lydia froze, hoping that they would at least have a chaperone. Surely her mother would come in with them? Or a maid?

“Lord Seabrook, you are most kind. I should be very grateful for a private audience with Miss Seabrook,” the Duke said, flashing a charming, thankful smile at her father.

“Oh, but, Father, surely we need a chaperone,” Lydia said, a gentle pleading in her voice.

“I would be happy to—” her mother began before her father silenced her with a look. He then turned to Lydia and simply smiled at her and shook his head.

“Darling, the door shall be open and we trust the Duke implicitly, do we not?” he asked with a laugh.

“You are too kind, Lord Seabrook,” the Duke said.

She looked at her mother with desperate eyes, but Lydia’s mother stayed quiet and did not meet Lydia’s gaze. It was clear that she felt for her daughter, but Lydia was still angry that her mother did nothing to help. It seemed that her mother was angry with herself as well.

“Come, dear. Let us give the two of them a private audience,” Lydia’s father said.

By the time Lydia and the Duke of Moreland entered the parlour, the maid had already placed the tea and biscuits for them. It was clear that they were meant to spend time getting to know one another, but that was the last thing Lydia wanted. Did she not have a further ten months or more before she had run out of time? Why were they trying to rush her now?

“Miss Seabrook, I sense that you are hesitant in regards to our union. I am curious to know why that is,” he said, a sensitive look in his eyes as he sat and poured the tea in a most humble fashion.

Was this all a ruse? What was he doing?

“Your Grace, I am not sure how all of this came to pass. You see, I believed that the agreement I made with my father was that I would be allowed this year to make a name for myself as a writer and then I would be free to choose what I wish for my future. It was only to be if I failed that I would be marrying you,” she said.

The Duke laughed and put a hand to his chest.

“Well, how good it is to know that I was merely your option for failure.

“Forgive me, Your Grace, that was harsher than I intended,” Lydia said.

“No, it is quite all right. I have not always shown you the man that I really am,” he said, softly. “It is difficult to be a duke, you know. Most

people do not trust you unless you show a great deal of arrogance, but then you are expected to be gentle and kind on a whim in order to woo a woman. I wish that it were not so confusing.”

“Is that so? You struggle with understanding how you must behave?” Lydia asked, not sure if she trusted him.

“Of course, Miss Seabrook. I detest the days when I feel that I am pulled towards a horribly domineering confidence. That is not comfortable for me, but I am given very little choice in the matter,” he said.

“I would say that you display it quite proficiently,” she replied, choosing her words carefully.

“And that is my concern. You see, the truth is that all I want is to be a good husband to a good wife. The rest...it is simply a matter of societal politics,” he said.

Lydia paused, not sure what to make of this. Who was this man? He was nothing like the Duke she had been seeing all this time. Was he being honest? Was he typically trying to impress and exuded arrogance because of that? Or was he manipulating her now? Was this the ruse?

“You have done well to fool me otherwise,” she said, cautiously. “And if you are being truthful, I am relieved to hear it.”

“I promise you, Miss Seabrook, I will be a good husband to you and I am a good man. I may have made mistakes and come off as prideful beyond the telling of it, but the fact of the matter is that I really do want to live a simple life,” he said.

“You seem to be a chameleon of sorts,” Lydia noted, still thinking he was trying to change and be what he thought she wanted from him.

“I am, indeed. That is a must for a man in my position. But it does not make me a bad man. It only means that I have no choice other than living my life upon the whims of the society in which I dwell,” he said.

For a long moment, Lydia eyed him, still suspicious as to his motivations.

“Well, anyway, I do hope that you find what you are looking for as a writer. One day, it is my hope that you and I shall be married. You really are a lovely woman,” he said, a hint of his rakish smile showing at the end of his statement. No matter how he tried to cover for the behaviour Lydia found so unappealing, he hadn’t been able to hide the way he now looked her up and down with intrigue.

Lydia felt she needed to hide her figure from him at that look, but she tried not to take it to heart. It was only evidence that he could not fool her forever.

“Well, thank you for clarifying this. Now, if you will, I think we ought to have my mother and father join us once more,” Lydia said, standing and going towards the door.

The Duke rushed in close behind her, clearly eager for more time.

“Please, Miss Seabrook,” he said, placing a hand at the small of her back in a manner far more intimate than any man ought to express.

Lydia’s eyes went wide in shock and she yelped in surprise just as he tried to pull her in closer. Frightened by the gesture, Lydia didn’t know what to do other than to run with all her might.

Bolting from the room, she kept the tears at bay while bursting through the door to the library and throwing herself into the chair nearest the fireplace. With her eyes clenched tight, she tried to steady her panicked breathing.

What was she to do? Could she tell her mother and father? Would they believe her?

“Miss Seabrook?”

Lydia bolted upright at the soft voice in the dim light. There, much to her surprise, was Darius. He came out from behind a row of shelves and slowly walked towards her.

“Are you all right, Lydia?” he asked, glancing around to ensure no one else was there before speaking to her so informally.

“Oh, Darius,” she sobbed, burying her face in her hands.

“Lydia, what happened?”

"I told you the Duke was coming for supper," she said.

"Yes, and that is why I decided to take my time with reading your work. I must confess that I wanted to observe this Duke if I had the chance," he said, apologetically.

"He is awful," Lydia insisted. "Just dreadful. He is a most terrible man. I do not know what to do, how I might be able to escape him. I know only that I cannot bear the thought of spending my life with someone so full of pride and shockingly familiar behaviour."

Darius froze and Lydia looked up at him, immediately seeing the anger in his eyes.

"Shockingly familiar? Did he...what did he do to you, Lydia? What did that man do?" he asked, clenching his fists.

"He touched my back and then tried to draw me close. I ran from him. I was frightened. I did not know what he intended, but I do know that he has a reputation. The worst part is that he tried to convince me he was not such a terrible man. All the time we sat there, he made an effort to fool me. Somehow, he believed that was all it would take to make me turn my back on everything I want," she said.

Darius reached out slowly, as though asking if it was all right for him to take Lydia's hand. She gave it freely and he held tight, kneeling before her and looking her directly in the eye.

"I promise, Lydia. We will find a way to get you out of this marriage. You will not be forced to wed the Duke. With more than ten months to go in this year you have, it is only a matter of time before we get your work published," he said.

"That is only if my father honours his promise," she said.

"And he will. Once you are published, you will be independent. Then, you would have the ability to refuse the Duke. You will not have to marry him. All will be well, Lydia. I am sure of it," Darius said, smiling through his words.

Lydia hoped that he was right. She hoped that there was still a chance for her to be happy and, more than anything, she hoped that there would be a day when they could be together.

Chapter Twenty-Two

“It would seem that she is in love with her tutor,” Charles said, standing near the chair the Duke of Moreland sat in as he drank his brandy.

“Her tutor?” he asked, scoffing at the utter ridiculousness of it.

“Indeed, Your Grace. I have kept my eye on them as you instructed. I followed them around town on a few occasions and I have waited to observe if this is a mere relationship of tutor and pupil or if it is something more. Now that I have watched them more closely, and after observing from the library balcony this evening, I have no doubt whatsoever,” Charles said.

“What did you hear?” the Duke asked.

“Very little. Their voices were muffled, but he took her hand and it was the way they looked at one another that told me all I needed to know. There is affection between them. And love. I have little doubt that there is love,” Charles said.

The Duke raised an eyebrow and stared into the fire. How could it be? Why would a woman like her choose to fall in love with a tutor rather than a duke? There was no reason for it and he would not stand for it.

If Miss Seabrook really intended to make a fool of the Duke, he was going to put a stop to it before things went any further. He would never allow her to push him into a position of humiliating himself by fawning over her, even pretending that he truly cared for her and about the feelings of others. Did she really think he would make it so easy for her to just reject him and move on? If so, she was about to have quite a surprise.

The Duke needed this marriage to move forward in a hurry. If Miss Seabrook intended to delay it, he would show her just what a mistake that was. Now that he had all the information he needed, he could

enact his own reconnaissance and inform her that he knew what she was doing behind the backs of her mother and father.

“Charles, I need something more from you,” he said.

“Whatever you wish, Your Grace,” Charles said, stiffly. He was a good man for unconscionable work. Charles had never seemed to care much for the Duke, but that didn’t stop him from obediently carrying out whatever task he was given.

“The next time you see the two of them out and about in society, you must come for me. No matter where I am. We must observe them,” he said.

“Yes, Your Grace. I assure you that it will be no trouble at all. We will keep our eyes open for them and I have no doubt that we will find whatever it is that you are looking or,” Charles guaranteed.

It was precisely what the Duke wanted to hear. At last, he was going to get what he wanted. He didn’t have to worry about bribing Miss Seabrook and, thank goodness, he was not going to have to pretend that he actually cared about her. This was all he needed and he was thrilled to recognise that he nearly had what he wanted. Soon enough, her money would be his and the magistrates would see that his debts were paid. He would even be able to take more money from Lord Seabrook, which was even better.

Soon enough, the matter would be concluded. He just had to bide his time.

“Your Grace,” Charles said in his calm, collected manner as he came swiftly into the study, two days later.

“What is it?” the Duke asked in irritation, looking over his accounts in the records he had been keeping. His debt was enormous and he was no longer certain how he could stop the men from coming to collect.

“I have come to get you. Miss Seabrook and her tutor are out in town. I thought you would be happy to observe them,” Charles said.

The Duke looked up at him with delight in his eyes. At last! This was precisely what he had been wanting.

It took him only ten minutes to make himself ready and they were soon making their way from the Duke's townhouse to the center of London...and then towards the outskirts.

Charles took the Duke to a small, dingy park. It was nothing like Covent Gardens or Hyde Park. Rather, it was the sort of place where the others went, the ones who could not be seen in such fine places.

When the Duke looked out from the coach, he saw Miss Seabrook seated on a bench with her tutor. Their heads were nearly touching as they looked over a series of papers. The Duke assumed it was her manuscript or something of the sort.

It was not difficult to spy the affection between the two of them. Anyone would notice it if they happened by and it did not appear as though Miss Seabrook or her tutor cared who saw them. They were clearly happy.

That bliss set a fire in the Duke's veins. He needed this to be brought to an end if he was going to get what he wanted and there was certainly one way to make that happen. Indeed, he could use all of this to his advantage and, once it was over with, he would marry her and take the money that was due him.

"Charles, I need to return home," he said. "I must send my card around to Lord Seabrook. I do believe that I should have an audience with his daughter this evening. And I know that there is nothing that would stop him from agreeing."

"As you wish, Your Grace," Charles replied.

"Oh, and one other thing I need from you," he said.

"Yes?"

The Duke smiled wickedly as he stared out at the young couple.

"Tell me everything you know about the tutor."

Chapter Twenty-Two

Lydia knew from the expression on her father's face that he was proud of something. But the moment she heard a masculine cough from the parlour, her heart sunk, realising exactly what that something must be.

"The Duke has requested a private audience with you. Hurry, you must go to him, her father said, urging her through down the hall.

"Father, no. Please. I cannot be alone with him," she said.

Her father took on a stern, tense expression.

"Lydia, you were very rude to him a few nights ago when he came. You ran off while he was simply trying to express his feelings and, although he defended you, saying he understood your worries, you need to apologise to him. This is your chance to do just that. Now, you must go to him," her father said.

Lydia was furious, but she knew that her father only had a small part of the information. If he had known the truth, the full extent of it, he would be angry on her behalf. But she knew that he wouldn't hear it, that he wouldn't believe it even if she told him. After all, she had been trying so hard to get out of this union, why would he think she was being honest?

Aware that she had no other choice, Lydia went to the room and entered it slowly and cautiously. Immediately, the Duke saw her and put down his teacup, standing and bowing at once.

"Miss Seabrook, I am so glad that you were willing to see me. Please, sit and talk with me," he said, looking very apologetic and hopeful. For a moment, Lydia thought he might be wanting to apologise to her for how he behaved.

"Very well," she said, still hesitant to trust him.

After a moment of quiet, he took a deep breath and smiled.

"I know that you were bothered by my action, by the fact that I touched your back. Truly, you must forgive me for having done something that bothered you so much," he said.

Lydia slowly nodded.

"Yes, I forgive you," she said.

"Good," he replied, exhaling in relief. "I wanted to be sure of that before I said what else I must tell you."

She waited, curious as to what he might tell her now. There was a strange foreboding in her heart, a sense that he was going to tell her something she desperately didn't want to hear.

"To be plain with you...I know," he said. "I know everything. I know that your tutor is not merely a man teaching you how to write, but a man who wants to make you his wife. It is clear to look at the two of you that you are in love and I am not going to sit by and allow you to make a fool of me."

Lydia's heart began to race. How was it possible? How had he figured it out? She couldn't believe that it had come to this and wished with all her heart that the Duke hadn't managed to figure this out. He would surely tell her mother and father! They would never forgive her.

"What are you talking about?" she asked, panicked.

"Please, do not pretend with me that you do not know what I am speaking of. I haven't the patience for it," he said.

She took a ragged breath in, trying to hold herself steady. If he was referring to her relationship with Darius, there was nothing she could do but hope he would say nothing about it. Obviously he was aware of the love she felt for Darius, but perhaps he would be gracious and understanding, perhaps he would give her the chance to have that happiness rather than use it to his own advantage.

"I know that you are in love with your tutor and I intend to be sure that it does not get in the way of the arrangement I have with your

father that you and I will be together. You must know that I am not the sort of man who allows his things to be stolen away and no matter what you feel for that pauper, I will never give you leave to be with him," he said.

"How dare you? You know nothing. You do not control my life," she said, standing firmly in determination that he would not get the best of her.

"Actually, I control every aspect of it. That is why you are here with me, because I willed it to be so. Likewise, I will it to be so that you marry me within the month," he said.

Lydia's lips parted in horror. How could he make this demand of her? What did he stand to gain from this? Was he really going to destroy everything she had for the sake of his own arrogance? Did he believe that she would fall prey to his wishes?

"I will never marry you," she spat, angered by his demands.

"On the contrary, I believe you will be begging to marry me once I tell you the reason you must. Listen to me, girl. You think your father will be pleased if he learns about your little arrangement? You believe that your gentleman will not be relieved of his duties without a reference?"

The air was still in the room and the silence was deafening. The threat hung over Lydia's head and she understood the true damage that would be caused by all of this if she did not find a way out of it.

"I did some research into your Mr. Frost. As I understand it, he is dependent upon his work for the sake of his family. He helps to support them, correct?"

Lydia made no motion to deny or confirm it, but the Duke of Moreland continued anyway.

"What would your father say about him if your affair were made public? Certainly, your father would not allow your reputation to be tarnished. Rather, society would be told that Mr. Frost made improper advances upon you. Not a single man in all of England would hire him as a tutor after that. Not for any reason at all. He would be destitute—as would his brother's family.

"Oh, those poor little children without a morsel of bread to eat. And it

would all be your own fault,” he said, grimly.

Lydia sunk into her guilt, realising just how dangerous the circumstance was. She would truly be responsible for their poverty if this continued. The Duke of Moreland was clearly not a man for idle threats. Among his manipulation, his ever-changing character, and the reputation he held in society, Lydia knew that there was nothing to be done about him. He was going to do whatever was necessary to ruin Darius if Lydia did not do as she was told.

“How could you do this?” she finally asked. “How could you ruin a man and his entire family all for the sake of me?”

“You mustn’t take it to heart, dear Miss Seabrook. It has very little to do with you. Yes, you are pretty enough, but there are many pretty girls in society. They, however, do not have the fortune that your father has and do not come with the dowry that you do,” he said with a chuckle.

Disgusted by his ignoble character, Lydia imagined for a moment that she might attack him in anger. But she had never been a violent woman and knew it would only make matters worse. Suppressing her rage, she waited, certain that there would be more, that the Duke would tell her exactly what he expected and what she would be subject to.

“One month, Miss Seabrook. That is when we must be wed. Once you have made your vows and I have the dowry, I will no longer hold this particular threat over your head. You may rest assured that I will care nothing about telling your father. Your pauper friend will have his reference and he may move on to the next family with a daughter who has foolish notions and ridiculous dreams,” he said.

“What do you mean? I still wish to do my work,” Lydia said, determined to finish out her year with Darius as her tutor.

But the Duke of Moreland laughed again and shook his head.

“Oh, that is truly amusing. You believe I would allow you, my wife, to take on a lover? I will not share you and I do not trust you to remain in a merely tutor and pupil relationship with this man. As it is, you have no choice but to relieve him of his duties. I suggest that you do this at the same time you break his heart,” he said.

Lydia tried to steady herself, feeling a wave of nausea wash over her. How could it be that she was in this position? Why would the Duke do all of this just for a bit of money?

“Is it truly worth it to you? Would you go through all of this just for a few pennies to your name?” she asked.

He grew dark for a moment, glaring at Lydia and not answering her right away. She wasn’t sure what she had said wrong, but the Duke was evidently unhappy with the comment. Then again, Lydia didn’t care much. She hated this man and all she wanted was for him to leave her alone, for him to disappear from her life.

But it seemed that he much preferred the idea of forcing her hand at every turn and making all the decisions for her. He was going to ensure that she didn’t even get the happiness that she felt with Darius, nor the joy she had when writing.

“Listen to me, Miss Seabrook. Whatever you believe you are able to do with your future, whatever you think you might do in order to get out of this arrangement that I am offering, I am here to tell you that you have no choice at all. This is the life you have now. You will be my puppet. You will do as I say. And I will do as I please or that tutor will end up on the street, along with his entire family. Do you understand?” he demanded.

Lydia’s heart ached, but she knew what she had to do. She had been forced into a corner and there was no way of escape. Not now. She and Darius couldn’t very well convince her father to allow the relationship, not when the Duke was set on destroying their reputations.

With tears in her eyes and a bitter set to her jaw, Lydia slowly nodded her understanding.

“Excellent!” the Duke exclaimed, clasping his hands together.

“Excellent? How can you say that? There is nothing excellent about this, not if you are ruining my life,” she cried, unable to stop herself any longer from weeping.

“You needn’t worry, Miss Seabrook. And your tutor shall never know. You will tell him nothing of this and he will simply believe that you have realised the importance of moving on and doing the wise thing,”

he said.

“What do you mean? I am to remove him from my life and not even tell him why?” she asked, her voice cracking on the final word when she understood that she would never even be allowed the chance to explain to Darius that she loved him and was doing this for his own protection.

“Of course not. If you tell him, he will try to convince you to run away together or say that he is willing to stand up to me. You know as well as I do that it would only end badly for him. If you say anything to him about this, I will return to my original plan and I will tell your father everything,” he said.

“How am I to spend my life with a man like you?” Lydia asked, broken by the thought.

“I have done it successfully for very many years, Miss Seabrook. Now, you must make yourself ready. We have a victory here and I am looking forward to telling your father the good news. I expect that he will rejoice to know that you will be a duchess in just a months’ time,” the Duke said, excitedly.

He drew near to Lydia and leaned in to steal a kiss, but she pushed him away. The Duke released a mocking laugh and Lydia leapt to her feet before running off through the door.

“You will not be able to escape me once we are married!” he lauded after her.

But Lydia wouldn’t hear him. She continued to run until reaching the garden outside where she fell to her knees and wept.

Chapter Twenty-Three

In the evening, Lydia was quiet while her family celebrated around her. Lord Moreland told her father a story of sharing his heart with Lydia, telling her how desperately he wished to marry her and how she wanted to marry him in return but was unable to let go of her dream of being a writer.

“Once I convinced her that I would not allow our marriage to stand in the way of her dream, but rather that I would support her until my final breath, she knew that she was happy to accept my proposal. Oh, I can hardly believe that I finally get to marry this lovely woman,” the Duke said, gazing upon Lydia in such a way that even *she* might have been fooled if she didn’t know any better.

Lydia had no idea what she conveyed as the dinner was served. Was she smiling? She couldn’t tell. Was she weeping? Perhaps. But no one else seemed to really notice her response either. Perhaps she was doing a better job of acting than she had anticipated. Or maybe her father was so happy about the arrangement that he simply didn’t care.

Regardless, the conversation quickly shifted to arranging the wedding and how many people in society would want to come to such an event.

Lydia sipped her water, not allowing herself to indulge in anything more for fear that she would lose her wits and begin screaming at the Duke. But once the dinner came to a conclusion, her mother drifted over to her.

“Lydia?”

“Yes, Mother?” she asked, looking up at her mother with weary eyes.

“You are not yourself. You have just informed us of a most exciting occasion, but you do not seem happy about it. I cannot help but wonder what it is that has you so distraught,” her mother said.

"I am perfectly fine, Mother," she said with a sigh.

"Lydia, I know you better than that. What is it? What is wrong? Do you not wish to marry the Duke? If not, why did you agree to the arrangement?" she asked.

"Mother, there is nothing that needs to be said about it. I am fine," Lydia told her, walking away and making her way up the stairs to go to her room.

She could feel her mother's eyes following her, but it didn't matter. Lydia couldn't tell a soul what had taken place. The Duke had made sure of that. And no, when Lydia was at her most broken, she couldn't even depend upon the woman who had inspired her most in life. She could not even turn to her own mother.

Dread crept into Lydia's chest when the clock struck. Darius would be arriving at any moment. In fact, he was later than usual. He never left it to the last minute to arrive for their lessons. But Lydia was not going to hold it against him this time. She would never be upset with him again. Not that she would have the chance to be.

It was only a moment later when she heard the front door opening. She stayed in the library, waiting for him, knowing that this was going to be the hardest moment of her life.

When Darius came into the library, he immediately smiled at Lydia and her heart only sunk further. She tried to smile back, but she felt no joy, no happiness. She felt only the weight of her burden and the realisation that this was the end.

"Forgive me for being a moment late, I had to run by Alistair's home quickly to leave them some money. I was unable to go last evening," he said.

"Oh..." she said, trailing off.

"I stayed up finishing your book. Lydia, it is remarkable. I can hardly believe how far you have come and how much you have developed it. There is no publisher who will refuse you now. They will not care that you are a woman, only that they will be the one to put your work out

there for the public to read,” he said.

“Please, Darius,” she said, her voice breaking.

“Lydia?”

The concern in his eyes only made things more difficult. Lydia wasn’t sure what to do. She had been practicing what she would say. Again and again, she had come up with her plan. But now that it was time to actually tell Darius what she needed to, Lydia found herself completely broken and unable to form her thoughts.

“What is it?” he prodded.

“Darius, there is something I need to tell you,” she said. It was awkward, trying to cut off his excitement and his energy surrounding her book. But Lydia knew what must be done and she stiffly held her head high regardless of the shame she felt with her next words.

“What is it?” he asked again.

“I am marrying the Duke of Moreland within the month,” Lydia said.

Silence descended upon them and Lydia waited for what might come next. Would Darius be simply hurt or would he be angry as well? What would he do and how would he respond? She was petrified that he would lash out at her, but Lydia also knew that there was nothing he could say or do that would take this pain away.

“What are you talking about?” he asked in disbelief.

“It is exactly as I have said. The Duke has begged me to marry him sooner and I have agreed. I know that it is not what you would have wanted, nor is it what we had discussed, but it is what must be done. I have had to accept my responsibility as a woman in society and I know that I need to marry him,” she said, the words mangled and stuck in her throat as she pushed them out.

“But we spoke of our future. How could you have changed your mind so suddenly on this? Did we not come to an agreement about what we wanted? I promised you that we would find a way around it, that we would ensure you never had to marry that man,” he said, desperation peppering his voice.

“I know what we said, but I was wrong to have suggested that we could actually follow through on it. You know as well as I do how unlikely our plans were,” she said.

He winced, as though she had slapped him in the face with that sentence. Lydia knew how deeply she was hurting Darius, but she also knew that it was the best way for him to let go of her. If she just got him to believe that she was willing to let him go for selfish reasons, or because it was too hard, he might lose his trust in her and think that she was selfish and unworthy of his affection.

That was, by far, the best choice she had if she was going to protect him. And no matter how difficult it was, no matter how painful, Lydia knew that this was the best thing to do. It was the only way she could possibly ensure that Darius was able to survive this. Otherwise, the threats made by the Duke of Moreland would tear him to pieces, ruining every chance Darius had of taking care of the people who mattered most to him.

“I truly am sorry, Darius. Of course, because I am marrying him, I have no choice but to tell you that I no longer require your services. My book will come to nothing and that is as it must be. Although I am very grateful for all that you have done for me, it was a fool’s errand for either of us to put so much effort into it. Honestly, I should have known from the very beginning that I would never be the sort of woman who would finish this project,” she said.

“And why not?” he asked through clenched teeth, tears flooding his eyes but refusing to spill over.

Lydia was also trying not to cry, but she was struggling to hold back the tears. They filled her eyes but she took a moment to turn and fan them so they did not flood down her cheeks. She hoped that Darius did not notice what she was doing, that he didn’t realise she was so close to buckling to her knees and begging him to listen, to know that she loved him and she never wanted to hurt him but she was in a desperate situation she couldn’t escape.

“I suppose,” Lydia began, swallowing hard so she could finish the thought. “I suppose it is because I am flippant. I am not the sort of woman who can truly dedicate herself to something. I do not value things, you see.”

“Oh, I see,” he replied, his nostrils flaring in quiet anger.

“You are upset,” she said, holding herself together.

“Yes, I am. And I don’t for a moment believe that you would actually do this, that you would make the choice you say you’re making. What is it? Did something happen? Why are you doing this?” he demanded to know.

Lydia panicked, seeing that Darius didn’t believe her. She couldn’t let him do this, couldn’t let him hold her back and stop her from ending things. If she did that, if she gave in to her heart and told him everything, she would have to watch him suffer. Maybe she was selfish after all, maybe Lydia simply couldn’t handle the idea of being responsible for his pain.

And this was a pain far less important than the suffering of his entire family.

“I am telling you the truth,” she said.

“You cannot possibly change your mind so quickly. You say you are flippant? I have never seen it before. Never. How am I meant to believe you now when you have given me no evidence of this character?” he challenged her.

“Just because you have not seen it doesn’t mean it was never a part of me. I am imperfect, Darius. We have known one another a short time and you do not know me perfectly. This is who I am. I get excited about things and then I move on,” she said.

Darius took a step back and tried to catch his breath, holding a hand to his chest as though he could feel a knife searing through the skin and bone, straight into his heart. Lydia ached as she watched him, but she said nothing to help. This was a death that had to happen if life was to continue.

And no matter what, she would be the one to do the killing.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Darius could hardly breathe. It wasn't possible. He didn't believe Lydia. Although there was no reason he knew of for her to lie, he believed she must be. She wouldn't simply turn on her heel and crush him like this, would she? Surely she had a reason.

"Lydia, it makes no sense. You said you cared for me. You told me that the Duke frightened you. Just days ago, I made you a promise. I told you I would do everything I could to stop you from having to marry him. Please, if something has happened, you must tell me. If someone has led you to believe that you have to marry him, just tell me and we can find a way around it," he said, urging her to be open with him.

It wasn't possible that she really wanted to marry that man. Darius had held her hand as she cried when the Duke of Moreland tried to embrace her. It had been a moment when he knew in his heart that he and Lydia were meant to be together and no one would keep them apart.

How could he have been so wrong? Had she not said that the Duke was an awful man? That he had a terrible reputation and was known for his rakish behaviours? Lydia had been disgustedly him and wanted to do everything within her power to avoid marrying him.

She wouldn't change her mind on someone like that. No woman of decent character would do that.

He felt as though the rug had been pulled from under him. He ached all over.

"Please, do not do this. Just...just do what we first agreed. If you do not wish to be with me, that is fine. I will be all right," he said, desperately trying to convince himself every bit as much as he wanted to convince her.

“Darius—”

“Just finish out this year with me. We will continue working on your writing and we will get your book published. It will not be difficult. You will see how simple it is. They are going to love it. Just spend this year with me as you said you wished to. Because if you do that, you will find your independence,” he said.

“My inde—”

“Can you not see? It means you will not have to marry the Duke. I am all right if you choose to stay away from me after that. Truly, I will understand. But at least then you will not have to suffer as that man’s wife. I know how much you detest him and I would be terribly sad if you believed you had no choice but to marry him when the whole world is open to you, Lydia,” he said.

Lydia looked at him calmly and patiently before responding.

“Darius, I am afraid you misunderstand me,” she said, slowly. It was clear that she was hesitant to speak further but felt that it was necessary to hurt him just a little bit more, although he didn’t think that was possible.

“I do not understand any of this,” he scoffed.

“I am not trying to avoid marrying the Duke. In fact, I have made this decision because it is what I want. I wish to be his wife. I want to be the Duchess of Moreland,” Lydia said, looking at Darius with compassion and a hint of sadness, or perhaps it was pity.

He couldn’t believe what he was hearing. Where had all of this come from? Who was she to do this? Why would she make him believe that she cared for him if she wasn’t going to hold to her commitments? Was it possible that she was being honest now? Did she really love the Duke?

“I do not believe you,” he said, stiffly, still denying that it was possible.

But Lydia looked down for a long moment, appearing somewhat desperate to make him see. She had tears in her eyes, but she fought them off and he was angry that she didn’t cry as he was.

He didn't want to hear it. He didn't want to listen to her lies, to listen to whatever she was going to tell him. She had already said too much, done too much. She was breaking his heart and Darius sensed that she was not finished just yet.

“Darius, I know that it will be difficult for you to hear, but the truth of the matter is that I made a mistake. I let you believe that I loved you when...it was simply an infatuation with your life,” she said.

The insult was a blow[29]. Was he simply some intrigue that she found entertaining? Was he a performer? A freak? Someone she could watch and enjoy, knowing that she would never have to truly live among him?

“I am sorry that I have hurt you, but this is what I wished to tell you. I need you to know that I never intended to cause you any pain, but I know that I have done just that and I will forever be ashamed of my actions. Nevertheless, I do hope that you may move on and live a happy life. There is no reason that you should not have a happy life, full of all the goodness you expect to have with me,” she told him.

Hearing those words from her, hearing the way she mocked him and how little she truly cared, Darius was thrown further from his confidence. And he realised that he had to let go of some of the hope he had. Maybe she wasn't lying, after all. Maybe she really was this shallow, foolish girl who had toyed with his heart. Had he not believed that all nobility were cruel? Had he not imagined that he would have a student as obnoxious and careless as any other?

As it happened, he had been correct from the very beginning. The mistake he'd made was beginning to trust Lydia, and certainly in falling in love with her. If he had held to what he knew from the start, he could have avoided all of this. And if he had listened to Alistair and Elizabeth, there never would have been a moment in his life of feeling as though he lost everything.

But this was all he had now. Just the pain and shock of being abandoned and left in the dark.

He didn't know what to do. Darius was completely still for a moment, trying to discern what his best course of action might be in moving forward. If he tried to convince Lydia to think again about this decision, he would simply appear desperate. But wasn't he? The truth

was, he didn't know how to stop himself from begging her to reconsider. He didn't know how to stop her from hurting him like this.

And maybe that was just it. Maybe there was no solution. Maybe he was just going to ache forever, knowing that the woman he loved more than anything wanted nothing to do with him.

"If you leave now, my father will give you the reference you need to find a good position elsewhere. He is happy that I am marrying the Duke and will be glad that I am giving up my writing for the sake of my marriage. I trust that you will find someone worthy of your time and efforts as a tutor. In fact, I expect that my father will be able to help you find someone who is in need of a man of your talents. You will not have to work very hard to find a new student," she said.

"I care nothing for references," Darius said.

"But you must. They are important and for the sake of your family, you will need it. My father will send it to you today or tomorrow. If you would prefer to collect it from him in person, I am sure that he would arrange it. Either way, you need not worry about that," Lydia said. At last, a tear spilled down her cheek and she swiped at it quickly, as though trying to hide her emotions from him.

Darius was deeply hurt, but he still wasn't sure about all of this. Was Lydia just playing with his heart from the beginning? Or was something else afoot? It didn't seem right. No matter how he looked at all of this, there was just something that didn't fit with the woman he had come to know and love. She wasn't this person. She hadn't been in all the time he knew her and there was no reason for her to shift with such drastic measure.

"Is there nothing else, Lydia? Nothing at all you can say to explain all of this?" he asked, making one final attempt to discern where it had all come from.

But Lydia looked him in the eye with a stiff expression. She was almost cold.

"I have told you everything. No matter how difficult it is for you to accept, I fear that you have no choice but to know that this is my decision and it is done," she said.

Darius swallowed and steadied himself as he turned from her to

collect his things on the desk in a silent, dazed manner. His head was swimming. However all of this had come to pass, he couldn't imagine that he would make it through another day.

A small part of him hoped that he wouldn't have to.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Watching Darius leave was the most painful moment Lydia had ever endured. She couldn't believe that she was having to say her farewell...or that he would never be back.

Still, she had to admit that she had played her part well. She was sick inside, knowing that she had done such a tremendous job hurting the man she loved, knowing that she had convinced him that it was all false and meant nothing.

She couldn't bear the agony of what she had done.

Lydia collapsed on the floor of the library and began to sob, great heaving cries of anguish. Her chest felt the weight of misery, knowing she had done everything the Duke asked for and she would forever live in agony because of it.

Suddenly, Lydia heard the sound of someone entering the library and she looked up to find her mother, wide-eyed and anxious.

"Lydia!" she exclaimed, rushing over to Lydia's side. She embraced her and held her tightly, rocking her ever so gently.

Lydia melted into her mother's hold, craving the comfort that was offered. Whatever she could take, whatever was offered to her, she was in desperate need of affection and of someone to tell her that she had done the right thing, that she had not just ruined her entire life.

"Lydia, darling, what is it? What has happened? You have not been yourself since accepting the Duke's proposal and I am so concerned about you. It seems that you live in pain at all times. What happened? What may I do to comfort you?" her mother asked.

"Oh, Mother, there is nothing! I wish I knew what to say, what to do. But nothing will ever make me happy again. I am afraid that I have ruined everything and there is no chance of making it right. I promise,

I did it for a reason, but how can I live with it? How can I endure it?" she asked, begging for answers.

Lydia would have given anything to feel empty in that moment. She wanted to feel the loss rather than the burden. She wanted to feel the ache of something missing rather than the anguish of what she held.

"Lydia, you must tell me. I do not understand. What happened? Is it the Duke? Has he done something?" her mother asked in concern.

"He has done more to harm me than anyone ever could, Mother. I wish I had never met him. I wish that Father had listened when I told him how awful the Duke is, but now it is too late," Lydia said.

"Lydia...did he...what has he done?" her mother asked, holding Lydia's face in her hands so they could look one another in the eye.

"I know what you are concerned about, Mother, and you need not worry about it," Lydia said, quelling her mother's fears that the Duke had made an advance upon Lydia. "Rather, he has wounded my heart in every way and stripped from me all the hopes I had for the future."

"How so? Is he unwilling to let you continue your writing? You know that you had a full year to pursue it. When the Duke announced that you had agreed to marry him early, I was surprised, but he said that he would encourage you to continue," her mother said.

"It is not my writing," Lydia said, trying to form the words she needed to say. She had to explain to her mother, but this confession was unlike anything else she had ever admitted in the past. Lydia knew that it might be difficult for even her mother to hear, to know that Lydia had been hiding this for so long.

"Then what is it?" her mother asked.

"I am in love with Mr. Frost," she confessed.

Her mother's eyes went wide again and she ever so slightly pulled back in shock.

"Your tutor? You fell in love with him?" her mother asked.

"I did. And he was never improper with me, but he loved me as well. We wanted to find a way to be with one another, to make a future

together. We were going to pursue it once I had my book published and I could be independent. Once I had money," Lydia said.

"Oh, dear," her mother said, more to herself than to Lydia.

"But the Duke found out. Apparently he wants my dowry. I do not know why, but I have heard that he enjoys gambling and I can only assume that he has debts to pay. So when he found out about my love for Darius, he came to me and threatened me. He said that if I did not marry him within the month so he could have my dowry, he would tell Father everything," Lydia said.

"Your father would be furious," her mother relented, understanding the predicament.

"And he would allow people in society to think that it was all because of Darius—of Mr. Frost. He would tell them whatever he could to protect my reputation but to prevent Mr. Frost from working again. The Duke was right. I know that Father would do it out of an effort to look after me. But I cannot let that happen. Mr. Frost supports his entire family and he must work," Lydia explained.

"So? You agreed to marry the Duke?" her mother asked, working it out on her own.

"Exactly. And he told me that I could tell no one about this, particularly Mr. Frost. So I had to send him away and break his heart. Now, he will have a good reference from Father and he will be able to find other work, but I will be able to protect him," Lydia said.

"Darling, I wish I knew how to help you. This is madness. I cannot believe the Duke of Moreland would do all of this just for the sake of a dowry. And Mr. Frost? What is he going to do now? He must be in such pain," her mother said.

"He is, Mother. He just left a short time ago and I have never seen that look in his eyes before. He was so sad. I have hurt him in every way possible, telling him that I love the Duke and I made a mistake thinking anything else. I told him that I was wrong for thinking I liked him instead," she explained.

Lydia felt such relief in confessing all of this to her mother. At last, she was able to get it off her chest and someone else would know that Darius was the man Lydia truly loved. No matter what happened, at

least there was someone who would understand the pain Lydia was feeling as she walked down the aisle to meet her groom on her wedding day.

But her mother stood, shoulders straight and determined, her jaw set in anger.

“We must take care of this. We have to tell your father. You cannot allow the Duke of Moreland to do this to you, not to my little girl,” her mother said.

“It will do no good, Mother,” Lydia insisted.

“Why not?” her mother asked, an angry laugh escaping her lips. “You want that man to get away with this? I am furious that I did not put my foot down sooner, but we have a chance to do it now.”

“I would give anything to make this right and to ruin the Duke if I could. But think about it. What would happen if we go to Father? He will not believe me, first of all. I am a writer, like you. I have always had quite an imagination and you both never completely believed me all the time as I grew up. I was always thinking and planning and allowing stories to fill my head. He will think this is just another, just a way for me to get out of the marriage,” Lydia explained.

Disappointment settled in her mother’s gaze.

“But it is not right to marry you off to that man,” she said.

“I know. And that is why I still wanted to try, still wanted to find a way to convince Father. But I have seen enough of the Duke now to know that even if Father accepts the truth, society will not. The Duke will tell everyone that my virtue was compromised. Our family will be humiliated and Mr. Frost will still lose all of his opportunities,” Lydia reasoned. She had thought through everything and there were no options for escape.

“I am trapped, Mother,” she said.

Lydia’s mother clearly did not know what to do any more than Lydia did. Still, she held Lydia close once more and simply comforted her daughter.

Closing her eyes, Lydia relaxed again into the embrace and thought

how grateful she was to not be alone in this anymore.

“Thank you, Mother,” she whispered.

“For what? I have done nothing. I am sitting here rather than finding a solution,” her mother said, clearly angry at herself.

“There is no solution to be found. This is what it is. I am just happy that there is someone who knows, someone who believes me and understands that I am stuck and cannot get out. You may think that means very little, but to me it means everything,” she said.

They sat there for a long while and Lydia breathed steadily, accepting her fate. Darius was gone from her life. He was safe, but he was gone.

She would marry the Duke at the end of the month and, after that, there would be nothing for her in life but to sit around the house all day, wishing that her life was different.

Perhaps she would still find a chance to write, but Darius knew the majority of people who could publish her and he would probably beg them all to stay far away from the fickle noblewoman who broke his heart and cared nothing for him in the end.

She considered that one day in the distant future, if she was lucky, she might write him a letter. She would tell Darius how she had loved him, how she had done it all for the sake of his own safety and his family’s ability to survive. She would tell him that she didn’t mean a word of her cruelty, but that she would love him until the day she died.

And she allowed herself, for just a moment, to imagine a day when she was walking down the street and passed by the handsome tutor on his way to see a student. He would smile at her, having read her letter, and she would smile back at him. Perhaps he would have a wife and children, or perhaps she would be a mother by then.

But if they were lucky, they would find a moment to sneak away and tell one another about their lives since the love of their youth.

And then, Lydia was brought back to the present reality. She was there, huddled with her mother, aching for the man in her imagination.

“Are you sure, Lydia?” her mother asked.

“Sure about what?”

“Sure that there is no way you can convince the Duke not to do this? Are you certain he will live up to his threats? Are you sure that he would ruin Mr. Frost?” she asked.

“Mother, I am sure that a man as cruel as the Duke of Moreland would do whatever was necessary to ensure that he had the upper hand in all things. He wants the dowry and he will do whatever he must to get it. As for me, I will do whatever I must to ensure that Mr. Frost and his family are taken care of,” she said.

“Even wounding the man you love and committing to live your life with someone you cannot stomach?”

“Even that,” she said.

“Do you know what it is like for me as your mother to watch this happen? I am not sure I can do it. I cannot abide the thought of you having to suffer at his hands[30]. If he is willing to do all of this before you are married, what will he do to manipulate you once you are?” her mother asked.

“I know you must be sad, but surely you can accept that there is no other choice,” Lydia said.

“That is not true,” her mother said. “One day, you will have children of your own and you will know how awful it is to watch your child suffer. To know that you are going to marry someone so awful and there is nothing I can do to make it right? Lydia, I will never forgive myself for not protecting you.”

“You must forgive yourself, Mother. You are protecting me from so much more. I could not carry the guilt of Mr. Frost’s family—of his brother’s young children—ending up starving on the street. That is what you are protecting me from. And that would be far worse than marrying a man I detest,” Lydia said.

She could hardly believe there was something she disliked more than the Duke of Moreland, but as she put it all in perspective, she knew that it was true. She was more than willing to suffer if it meant

preventing the pain of another.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Darius rushed to Alistair's home, determined to speak with his brother about everything try to get it all out. He still didn't know how to handle the pain he felt, but hoped that Alistair would at least be a comfort to him.

Although Alistair had tried to warn him, Darius had still trusted Lydia. He'd made an awful mistake and now he needed to rectify it.

If there had ever been a time that he regretted a decision in life, this was it. There was no reason that he should have begun to trust someone from a noble family. She was just like all the others. He had known going into this that she would be, but she had fooled him.

Darius had been wrong. He had allowed himself to believe that she was different, purely because he liked her. She seemed so decent, like the kind of woman that he would want to spend his life with. But now, he realized that all she had done was take time away from him.

More than likely, Lydia really had simply played with his heart. She had used him because she needed affection and realized that he was willing to give her that. She had given in to her own need for attention and had not cared about what Darius needed.

Of course, his brother had warned him. And he had a warrant himself many times. But she had been so excellent, so convincing. Why would he have questioned her?

By the time Darius arrived at Alistair's home, he was more depressed than ever. Of course, his brother had warned him. And he had His heart was heavy and he was convinced that he had done all of this because of his own need to be loved. He had done all of it because he missed his mother and father and wanted to think that someone could care for him as well.

Darius knocked on the door and Elizabeth answered, flashing him a bright smile.

“Darius! What are you doing here? I thought you would be with Lydia today. Is she ill? Or have you brought her?” she asked, glancing out the door.

Darius shook his head, keeping his eyes averted.

“Oh, dear,” she said. “Come in. I have a feeling you need a cup of tea.”

Darius followed her inside and waited as Elizabeth went to lift the now-crying baby from his bassinet.

“Hush, darling,” she whispered, rocking her.

“Is Alistair home?” Darius asked.

“Yes, he is just getting me a rag from our room. Oh, there he is now,” she said.

“Darius! What an unexpected surprise. You left a few hours ago. If you are back already, I expect that you were unable to tutor Lydia today?” he asked.

“I need to speak with you about her,” Darius said, glancing between Alistair and Elizabeth.

“What is it?” Elizabeth asked.

“Alistair was right. It was doomed from the beginning. She is marrying the Duke of Moreland and told me that she actually wants to, that she was mistaken about her feelings for me. She sent me away, telling me her father would still give me a good reference but that she does not wish to continue our time together,” he said, his voice hoarse from holding back tears as he had walked to the home.

“Oh, Darius,” Alistair said, exhaling with the words. He sat on the rickety chair and gestured for Darius to join him. Elizabeth handed Alistair the baby and she rushed to get the kettle going.

“It would seem that she was simply playing with my heart from the beginning. She never cared anything about me. She only wanted to experience life with a passer. She wanted to know what it was like and how she might be able to use it as inspiration for her writing. I was a fool to believe that it could ever be anything more,” he said.

"You were not a fool. You were in love," Alistair said.

"But we know what Father went through. We know what people like them are like. And I knew that Lydia was one of them. I allowed myself to think that she was different, simply because I liked her. If I had kept my wits about me, i never would have fallen for that. I would have been smarter than that," Darius said.

"You cannot trick your heart into something it refuses to do," Alistair told him.

"But if I had not allowed my heart to even go to such a place, I could have prevented all of this. I would not have had to suffer as I am now. And she simply sent me away. It was a sudden turn. She never gave me any sign that this was what she wanted or that she didn't really love me. She hated the Duke. He frightened her. But now, suddenly, he is the one she wishes to be with," Darius said.

"You must feel terribly used," Elizabeth said, compassionately.

"I do," he replied.

"It is strange though. She did not seem like the sort of woman who would do something this cruel. I quite liked her and found her to be very genuine and decent. I never would have thought she would be the sort who would hurt a man without a care. And she certainly never seemed to be the kind of woman who would choose a duke over a decent man," Elizabeth said with a scoff.

"She fooled us all," Darius said, bitterly.

"Herself included, it would seem," Elizabeth said.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"I mean that she truly appeared to believe her feelings. I know that she never told me outright how she felt for you, but I saw the look in her eyes. It was the look of a woman in love. I cannot imagine that all of that was a game to her. I honestly think she loved you when she said she did," Elizabeth told him.

Darius didn't want to think about that. It was too complicated to imagine that any part of Lydia had been honest. She had told him the

truth only when she sent him away and that cruelty within her was something he never wanted to face again.

“You do not understand, Elizabeth. You did not hear her, did not listen as she tried to explain it all away, telling me how little I really meant to her. She never loved me. I know that now. And although it is painful to admit it, I suppose I should have known all along. There was never a chance for us and she was only humouring me by pretending otherwise,” Darius said.

“You will be all right,” Alistair said. “You will find someone else one day. I am sure of it.”

Before Darius could respond that he did not want someone else, Elizabeth cut in again.

“Darius, how was she when she told you all of this?”

“What do you mean? She simply told me,” he said.

“Was she said? Angry? Happy?” Elizabeth asked.

“She...she was sad, I suppose. Full of regret, perhaps? I imagine she just felt bad for having hurt me,” he said.

“Are you sure it was not more than that? Was she crying?” Elizabeth inquired.

Darius thought back to how hard Lydia had tried to hide her tears, how she had most certainly been upset, although he thought it was only because of her guilt. Even if he wanted to think it was something more, he wouldn't let himself believe it.

“Yes, she was crying. She didn't want me to see it, but she cried,” he said.

Elizabeth shook her head in frustration and Alistair flashed her a warning look.

“What is it? Why are you two behaving that way?” Darius asked.

“Why are you being so foolish? If a woman heartlessly uses a man, she does not cry when she lets him go. She does not appear sad in any way. She simply moves on and forgets him. If she cried, there was a

reason for it and I can assure you that it was more than guilt,” she said.

“You do not know that. You were not there and you did not see how strange she was, acting as though it was a simply matter of sending me on my way,” he said.

“Or she wanted you to believe that it meant nothing to her when, in truth, she was aching. Darius if she was crying in the midst of it—especially if she did not want you to see her tears—that is all the proof you need. Of course she loves you,” Elizabeth insisted.

Darius didn’t say anything. He didn’t want to believe Elizabeth. It was too complicated if she was right. He would have to find out what was going on, why Lydia had done this to him. And deep down, he didn’t want to make that effort. All of this had been so painful, how could he bear to spend one more moment trying to discern Lydia’s actions?

“So why would she do all of this?” Darius asked.

“There must be a reason. Can you think of anything? What might have happened that would cause Lydia to pretend that she no longer loved you? Something must have happened. Perhaps her father discovered the truth?” Elizabeth asked.

“No, if he had found out, he would not give me a recommendation. I would have been dragged out into the streets and made a fool of,” Darius said.

But then, he realised that Lydia’s father was not her only threat. She was supposed to marry the Duke after a year, but now it was suddenly happening after only one month. There had to be a reason for that as well. And if something had happened to force Lydia into this position, maybe she believed that pushing Darius away was her only choice.

“What is it? Your eyes lit up,” Alistair said, looking keenly at him.

“I just thought of something that might have given her a reason to send me away,” he said.

“You see? I told you!” Elizabeth exclaimed.

“But it might not be true. I should not get excited about a reason when the truth could be exactly as she said,” he reminded them, not

wanting to have hope if there was no hope to be had.

“Oh, Darius, do not look at it that way. If there is a reason, you must find out if that reason is true. You cannot lose this woman if there is any hope that you two might be together,” Elizabeth urged.

It was possible that the trap that had threatened Lydia had finally closed in around her. Maybe the Duke had a reason to force her hand. Maybe he really did push her into a position of having to marry him no matter what.

And, if that was true, Darius knew that he might be the only one who could help her. He might be the only one who would be able to get her out of this mess and ensure that she was safe and happy, free of the madness of a man who frightened her.

“Is there any way to help her, Darius?” Elizabeth asked.

“I am not sure. If the Duke of Moreland is forcing Lydia into marrying him, there has to be a way to get her out of it. I do not know what to do, but I could never leave her in a position of having to marry that man. She is afraid of him. I know that she detests him. And if I am able to stop him from harming her, I have no choice but to act upon it,” he said.

“Exactly,” Alistair said. “I know that I was discouraging when you first told me how you love her, but if this is what will make you happy, you know that I will support you. But you cannot leave her to go through all of this on her own. You must act quickly and get her out of this, Darius.”

“I will,” he said. “I will do whatever it takes.”

“And what will it take?” Elizabeth asked.

Darius thought for a moment, considering that very question. Underneath it all, he knew that it would take everything.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Even if it had all been true and even if Lydia had rejected him, Darius was not going to give up. He would do what he needed in order to help her. Of course, he could not go directly to her and beg her to tell him if he had been right in thinking she was being forced into this.

But there was one other thing he could do and it was time he pursued it.

Darius took the manuscript that he kept in his satchel and made his way into the heart of London, where he could be surrounded by books and booksellers, readers and printers. It was the place he went for inspiration, the place his father had brought him and Alistair as children so they could grow and expand their knowledge.

And now, he was here in the hopes that it might rescue Lydia.

Darius made his way to Whitaker and Pruitt Publishers and entered through the front door to find his dear friend, John Banks, behind a desk.

“Darius? I have not seen you for an age. What brings you here?” John asked.

“It is good to see you. I have come because I wanted to see if you would take a look at a manuscript for me,” he said.

“Oh, the one you mentioned before? You said that it was written by a pupil of yours?” John asked.

“Yes,” he replied. “A young man by the name of Paul Winbrook.”

The pseudonym was all Darius could come up with on the walk over. He figured it was as good as any and that it at least kept a small part of Lydia’s name.

“Winbrook? Strange, I have never heard such a name,” John said, eyeing him warily.

“Yes, well, he is a nice young man and very gifted. I think you will be happy with the work,” Darius said.

“The story you described sounded decent enough. I am curious to read it and see if the book itself lives up to the hype you have given it. You shared with me that the writer had been told that he is technically proficient, but lacking in emotion?”

“That has changed, rather significantly. I was surprised when I discovered how easy it was to break through and I believe that Mr. Winbrook simply needed someone to guide him through the difficult task of translating feeling to the page,” Darius said.

“Hmm,” John said, looking over the first page of the manuscript and quickly skimming to the second.

“What do you think? Would you be willing to take a closer look at it? I am sure that you will enjoy the story and also the work. Mr. Winbrook will be so glad if you at least take the time to review his work and decide whether or not it is right for Whitaker and Pruitt. And if you do not think that you are the right publisher for it but have other ideas, I would be glad for that as well,” Darius said.

“Yes, of course. I expect, however, that if this young man is as good as you say and if he has been tutored by you, I will find his work to be precisely what we are seeking,” John said.

“I do hope so. Honestly, you will be pleased. I cannot imagine anyone with taste like yours to be discouraged by what he reads here,” Darius said.

He stood for a moment as John continued to look through the pages, not in any great depth but still appearing intrigued. If this worked out, Lydia might manage to get published after all. And if she did that, there was still a chance she could escape the marriage to the Duke and she would have her independence. If she was free, she could do as she pleased and continue to write.

Darius didn't know that she would ever be willing to have the future he wanted with her, but even if he could help with this one thing, it was his last gift of love to her, the last chance he had to express how

much he cared for her. And if Lydia at least knew that, maybe all of this would have been worth it.

“Will you give me just a few days?” John asked.

“Yes, of course. When should I be back?”

“Perhaps Friday? I think I could have the book finished by then and I will be able to run it past my superiors as well. Generally, they allow me to move forward with a work that I feel very passionately about, but since your student is new to the world of writing, we must consider all the costs involved and weigh the value of publishing it,” John said.

“Of course. I am sure there is much you will need to consider. And I will come back on Friday to hear your decision,” Darius said, thrilled that he had managed to do this and hopeful that John would make the right decision.

He left the publisher with hope in his heart that things would eventually come together. Lydia would be all right. And if he could just get rid of the Duke, maybe life would be good again.

On Friday, Darius quickly made his way to see John again at the publishing office. He had spent the past two days searching for new positions and finding the letter of recommendation from Lord Seabrook waiting at his home. It had been a miserable thing, trying to decide where he would work now that he was not teaching Lydia each day.

Without her, Darius found that he was utterly depressed, wishing that he could rush back to the townhouse and beg her to come out and speak with him. It would have been a terrible idea, but that hardly stopped him from doing it. All he wanted was to know that she was all right and everything would be fine.

Still, Darius needed to prove himself and if he could at least make an effort to get her work in the hands of publishers, that would be something to show her how much he loved her.

When he arrived at Whitaker and Pruitt, John greeted him with a wide smile and came rushing over to meet him.

“Darius! Whatever you have taught this young man, it is remarkable. I felt every word. I felt every colour, every emotion, every thought. He is a tremendous writer and the story only added to it. The way Mary struggled to express her love and how she gave in to being with the man who was not considered good enough for her? How she found the boldness to fight for their love even when it was impossible? I was floored,” John said.

Darius tried to let go of the weight of the storyline, ignoring how it had mirrored the one he had with Lydia. For the moment, his purpose was to discover whether or not John would see to it that the work was published.

“And? What does that mean for the book, John?” he asked.

“It means that, if you will allow us, we would love to publish the work of your pupil. We will, of course, need him to give approval as well, but we certainly want to carry this title. I trust that it is going to be one of our top sellers,” John said with a laugh.

Darius was thrilled to hear this news, thinking how happy Lydia would be when he told her. Of course, he would have to find a way to tell her and to get her permission. Moreover, he needed to be sure that John would be willing to publish the work even once he learned that the author was no Paul Winbrook.

“There is something about Paul I need to tell you,” Darius said.

“Yes?”

“Paul Winbrook is just a pseudonym,” Darius confessed.

John sighed and gave a shrug.

“I am not surprised. I ought to have known that this was your work, Darius. How charming of you, not wanting me to show any nepotism and pretending that it was the work of a student. Only a master could have written this—”

“No, John. No, it was not me. I am not the author,” Darius said with a laugh of his own. He was glad for how complimentary John was, but knew that he could not take credit for this work.

“Oh? Then who?”

“My student is not named Paul Windbrook—”

“You mean *Winbrook*,” John corrected him on the lie even as Darius confessed.

“Oh, whatever it was. I made up the name,” Darius said, waving away the unnecessary correction. “The fact is, the author is named Lydia Seabrook. She is a woman and I am not sure if you are still willing to publish her work in light of this.”

John paused and looked intently at Darius for a moment. He sighed and then smiled once more.

“While I am startled to learn this, I am also impressed. Not only by the work itself, but that you actually managed to trick me about it. I should have known that you would do anything on behalf of a student, but that really is something,” John said.

“And? What does that mean for publishing it? Would you superiors allow it?” he asked.

“They have already given me permission to move forward and—I will tell you a secret—your Miss Seabrook is not the first female to have been published here,” John said, leaning forward and tapping his nose to signal that it was a secret for Darius to keep.

“Well, that truly is a good thing to know,” Darius said. “And if that is the case, I am thrilled to know that we may move forward. I will do whatever I need to get Miss Seabrook’s information to you and yours to her. Although it will be somewhat difficult for me to reach her at the moment, I will take care of it all.”

“Difficult?” John asked, looking nervous.

“Oh, it is nothing. You may simply focus on your part and I will have her around in time to work on the edits. I am sure of it,” Darius said.

“There will not be many,” John replied.

“Even better,” Darius said.

John shook his head in disbelief as he eyed the manuscript.

“It is truly brilliant. I would not have known that it had been written by a female, but I cannot bring myself to care. The work stands on its own and I am thrilled to publish it. Thank you for bringing it, Darius. I am still waiting for a book from you, but in the meantime, this will do just fine,” John said.

Darius gave him a nod of appreciation and then made his way out from the office and into the street.

He had work to do. Now that they were moving forward with publishing, he needed to find Lydia and tell her, to ensure that she was able to get everything in order and make the necessary edits.

Despite how their closeness had ended, Darius was still happy that he had been able to do this. If it turned out that she had been honest with him at the end, that she really did not care for him, he still loved her and it would take time before he could stop loving her.

The fact was, there were many people in London who deserved to read that magnificent book. If he was not going to do it for Lydia, Darius was doing this for those readers.

Then again...he knew in his heart that he was doing it for her and her alone.

Darius wanted to tell Alistair so they could celebrate, but he had to get to Lydia first so she knew what was going on. She deserved to be the first.

In his joy, Darius charged forward, heading towards the street where Lydia lived. But as he turned the corner on Burn's Street, he bumped into someone very familiar.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

“Oh, forgive me,” Darius said, straightening up and apologising to the man. There was something about him that Darius thought he recognised, but he couldn’t quite place what it was. For a long moment, he wondered if he had seen him around the city or where it might have been.

“I do believe there is quite a lot to be forgiven,” the man said.

It was then that the harsh, cold reality hit Darius. He realised where he knew this man from.

“You,” he said in horror. “Your father...he was the one...”

“Yes, boy. I remember you as well. You were the little runt who used to come with his father to our home. And then, your foolish father decided to pretend that he knew better than my own. Can you imagine it? A pauper like yourself thinking you know better,” he scoffed.

Darius gritted his teeth, furious at having to face the son of the man responsible for their misfortunes. If Darius’s father had not been ruined by that Duke, things would have been different. Darius and Alistair would have had far greater opportunities and been able to succeed like any other man. They would not have been titled or overtly wealthy, but they would not have suffered as they did.

“Get out of my way,” Darius growled.

“Or what? You will come after my bride again?” the man challenged.

Darius looked at him with confusion, not understanding what he was talking about.

“Honestly? Do you know nothing?” he mocked.

“What are you speaking of?” Darius asked.

“It would seem that you decided to retaliate against me by pursuing the woman I am meant to marry. You wanted to take that dowry from me so you could feed your brother’s children. But I won, Mr. Frost. I am marrying Miss Saabrook at the end of this month and there is nothing at all you can do to stop the matter,” he said.

“The Duke of Moreland...” Darius whispered.

“You have no idea how I felt when I realised that you were the same boy my father was wise enough to be rid of all those years ago when he sent your father away. And yes, now you have lost to us once more. Is it not time that your kind learn that you will never be anything more than the rodents of London?” he asked, cruelly.

“How dare you,” Darius said.

“What are you doing here anyway? On this street? Please, do not tell me you are on your way to speak with my darling Lydia. She has already told you that she wishes only for you to leave her alone. She has nothing more to say to you,” the Duke warned.

“But I have something I need to tell her,” Darius said, standing his ground.

“You think I care about that? I am going to protect her from you, no matter what. She is my wife, not yours. You cannot imagine how happy I was when I learned who you were because it meant that I could just tell you once and for all that you are nothing and you will never be anything and it is a good thing that Lydia figured that out long ago,” the Duke said.

But still, Darius stood firm. He was utterly unwilling to let the Duke force him to give in. He couldn’t. He wouldn’t risk missing this one chance to see Lydia.

“What are you doing? You must go,” the Duke said.

“I am here to see Lydia. I will not leave until I have done so,” Darius insisted.

The Duke narrowed his eyes and, in an instant, he pulled back his fist and launched it towards Darius, knocking him down to the street

below.

“Come, watch for me,” the Duke said, ushering his footmen who had been sitting at a distance. Darius realised that the Duke wanted to ensure he was not caught and the footmen would be able to want him if anyone was coming.

But the Duke of Moreland leaned over and grabbed Darius’s shirt by the collar. His face was threateningly close to Darius and Darius could smell the man’s awful breath in his face.

“Leave now or this will not be the end of it. And if you think that it hurts to be hit, imagine the pain when I tell the constable that you came at me first. Who are they going to believe? You will never work again and your brother’s family will have nothing. So go,” the Duke ordered.[31]

Darius didn’t know what to do. He couldn’t leave yet. He hadn’t spoken with Lydia or told her about the publishing opportunity. What would happen if he failed to inform her of the most exciting news he had?

But he couldn’t let Alistair’s family go without. The Duke, however vile, was right. No one would believe a man like Darius over a duke and it could cost him his work and everything else.

There was nothing to be done but to leave.

Darius stood, without another word to the Duke. He ignored the burning scrapes on his hands from when he landed on the ground and turned to walk away, separated from Lydia for good.

“Here, let me clean your nose. There is blood in it,” Elizabeth said, urging Darius to sit properly.

“What of it? I was such a fool. I could not even get to Lydia and tell her the news. I was stopped by that awful man. I let him get the best of me and I will forever live with that regret,” Darius said.

“Well, you did all you could. Perhaps you might wish to speak with John about the situation and see if he will go to Lydia directly,”

Alistair suggested.

“John would be upset with me if I asked him to do that. He thinks that Lydia and I are still working together. I am not sure what I will do. But I want to try and find an opportunity to go to her and tell her everything. She will be so happy,” Darius said.

Elizabeth and Alistair looked at one another once more with their usual knowing look before Elizabeth focused on Darius’s nose again.

“There we go. It is mostly clean. I think you will be fine, but it is likely to swell. I am no doctor, but it does not appear to be broken,” she said.

“Thank you, Elizabeth. It hurts, but it is bearable,” Darius said.

The room fell silent and Darius sensed that Alistair and Elizabeth wanted only to discuss his wellbeing and how he could move forward, but Darius had too many other things on his mind. He had not yet let go of the past.

“Are you all right?” Alistair asked, looking at him with concern.

“Yes, but I also cannot imagine anyone wanting to hire me when I have clearly just been hit in the face. They will think I am a brawler,” he said.

“Yes, that is my worry,” Alistair said.

“You need not worry about money in the meantime. Lord Seabrook paid me extra for my time there and for cutting the lessons so short. He has also already recommended me to two different families. I will find work again and it will be soon. But that is not my greatest concern at the moment,” Darius explained.

“But it should be,” Alistair said, gently.

Darius was hurt, not knowing why Alistair would say something like that. Hadn’t Darius done everything he could to provide for their family as well as himself? Had he not made every effort to look after them? Now, when his heart was distracted by something else, why wasn’t Alistair being more supportive?

“What do you mean by that? What have I done wrong? Do you believe

that I have failed you because of all of this? There was nothing I could do. I made every effort to do my work well for Lydia. I never expected to fall in love with her,” he said.

“Darius, I am not criticizing you. Not at all. We are so grateful for everything you have done for our family and I truly yearn for the day when I have decent work and we are able to repay you with our gratitude,” Alistair said.

“If you are not angry about my being relieved of my duties then what do you mean?” Darius asked.

“I mean that I want you to focus on moving forward. I know that you are eager to tell Lydia about her work being good enough for publishing, but she sent you away, Darius. For better or worse, she asked you to leave. That means that you should not be wasting your time with her anymore,” Alistair said.

Elizabeth looked down, as though she was not ready to refute what Alistair had said. Darius eyed her for a moment, waiting for her to defend him, to defend his efforts to pursue Lydia.

But she said nothing.

“Elizabeth? You agree with this?”

She looked up at him with sadness in her eyes, but gave a small nod.

“I think she probably still loves you, but I cannot abide the idea of you coming here covered in blood because of that man. Darius, whether Lydia loves you or not, she sent you away for a reason. Perhaps it is time to respect that and to do as she asked. Maybe you really do need to let go and look to the future,” she said.

“I cannot believe this. I thought you supported my love for her. I thought you wanted me to be happy,” Darius said.

“We do...”

“But you need to think this through,” Alistair said, picking up from Elizabeth. “The best thing for now is that you separate yourself from Lydia. Think about all that you have endured as a result of falling in love with her. This will not be the end, Darius. You are still fighting to try and get through one moment at a time. Even though she sent you

off, you are still trying to get her published,” Alistair pointed out.

“Of course I am. She deserves it. Her work is remarkable,” he defended.

“Then she needs to work on her own to get it published. You need not continue trying to track her down and speak with her and convince her that she should pay you any mind. You will find a woman one day with a brilliant mind of her own who will love you in return. She will not make you suffer like this or break our heart,” Alistair said.

But Darius couldn't imagine loving anyone other than Lydia. She was everything to him. And Elizabeth had given him hope, making him believe that Lydia might still care for him but be stuck in the midst of her circumstances. It was Elizabeth who had encouraged him not to give up and now she was siding with Alistair and agreeing that he needed to let go of Lydia and move on.

“I cannot listen to this,” Darius said.

“It is the best thing for you,” Alistair said.

“How can you say that? Do you really believe it?”

“I do. Because if you separate yourself from Lydia for good, it is the only way you are going to protect your heart. Think of all the pain you have been through lately. What is the cause of it all? Everything can be traced back to Lydia. She may not have done this on purpose—or perhaps she did—but it is done. She has wounded you so many ways in such a short period of time. I think it is best that you let her go and imagine what your life will be like now that you are free,” Alistair urged.

Darius paused and tried not to get dizzy, realising that no one had any hope left to offer him. If this was the end, he needed to accept that he would never be happy again. He needed to make a decision and determine what the future would look like if he was not fighting for Lydia, if he was unable to feel the joy of being near to her.

He stood without a word, head hanging low because he didn't have the energy or motivation to lift it. At least Elizabeth had cleaned the blood from around his nose. It would help if he had to go and pretend that he wanted a position touring another child somewhere else.

Darius was back at the beginning, depending on the wealthy elite of London society just to survive, but hating them in every way. He had found himself in the last place he wanted to be.

Alone. Broken. And missing the woman he loved.

In less than a month, Lydia would be a duchess and she would never be able to spend time on her writing. She would never have another chance to publish her work or to make a name for herself in the literary realm. And if Darius decided to give up, there was nothing to stop her from making that mistake.

He left Alistair's home, ignoring the echo of Elizabeth's voice as she called after him. Soon enough, he was onto the main road, staring into a sea of people who lived their lives each day in the same way he lived his.

Alone. Broken. And wondering if there would ever be hope again.[32]

Chapter Twenty-Nine

The more Lydia was learning about the Duke of Moreland, the more she found herself frightened by him. He was scaring her constantly through his behaviours and the way he seemed to think he was doing nothing wrong or inappropriate even when it clearly was.

He was incredibly forward and she was learning that the incident when he had put his hand on her back and tried to pull her close was not an uncommon occurrence. Beyond that, he had a terrible tendency to make rude comments, suggesting things that Lydia was shocked by.

“Perhaps when we are married you will not bother to wear such high necklines,” he said once, gazing at her chest.

Lydia felt compelled to wear a cape at all times if she needed to. Anything to avoid having the Duke’s attention. And she was terrified that she would soon have to be his wife and be expected to give him children. Surely that was not a requirement for him to get the dowry, was it?

“Miss Seabrook, you look ravishing,” he said when he arrived one afternoon. They were alone in the parlour as her father often allowed.

“Thank you, Your Grace,” Lydia replied, clenching her jaw.

But the Duke pulled her closer and whispered in her ear.

“Perhaps a ravishing woman must be ravi—”

“Do not finish that sentence, Your Grace, or you will regret it,” Lydia threatened, gritting her teeth and twisting away from him.

The Duke laughed and shrugged off her rejection.

“Very well. I must try to woo you, however. But you need not worry. I am a man and I will do as any man does. If his wife is not diligent in his desires, he will simply find another woman,” he said, shockingly. Lydia could not believe that he would be so forthright and heinous.

It was not the sort of thing she would have expected any man to say, even one as grotesque in nature as the Duke. But she had quickly come to realise that there was nothing about him by which she could be shocked anymore. He was full of awful comments, terrible gestures, and immoral expectations.

“If you will give me a moment to gather myself, Your Grace,” Lydia said, giving a quick curtsy and rushing from the room as she so often did when he was around.

Lydia made her way up the stairs and to her bedroom. Once inside, she locked the door and made her way to her desk. She needed to write. Most often, when she was trying to get away from the Duke, she came up here to write.

Now and then, her father would be angry, but her mother would always calm him, explaining that it was normal for a young woman to be anxious about her impending marriage. Lydia appreciated the excuse and the fact that her mother was trying to advocate for her and give her the chance to escape whenever she was able.

But still, Lord Seabrook did not seem to understand. Lydia had asked him many times if he was certain that the Duke was the right man for her to marry. He always seemed convinced by it.

Lydia threw herself into her writing and working on a new story. The hero of the tale was a man based on Darius. He was not a wealthy man, but he was intelligent, loyal, and diligent to all things good. He had flaws, of course, but he was wonderful in every other way.

Then William held his hand to his heart and whispered to Amy exactly what she needed to hear.

“You are the only[33][34]—

A knock interrupted Lydia as she did her work and she stood to answer it. She hated these interruptions, knowing that it was probably her father begging her to come back downstairs and entertain the Duke.

Indeed, when she answered, the maid was there with a compassionate smile.

“Begging your pardon, Miss Seabrook, but your father has requested you in the parlour,” she said.

“Yes, of course. Thank you, Charlotte,” she replied.

Lydia went back in her room for a moment, trying to prepare herself to be back in the presence of that awful man.

Up here, she could write about William and feel close to Darius again. She could create this man on paper who loved his family and did anything he could for them, sacrificing his own happiness and comfort to ensure that they were well looked after and taken care of.

But Lydia knew that she would not be marrying Darius. She was going to be the Duchess of Moreland and she would detest her husband more and more each day.

When she made her way back down the stairs, Lydia entered the parlour to find her father and the Duke seated and drinking brandy. Her mother was in the corner with a concerned smile on her face as she welcomed Lydia to sit beside her.

“There you are! You have left your guest once more?” her father asked.

“Yes, forgive me, Father. You know that these are my final weeks to write and there are moments when inspiration strikes and I simply must run to my room and take advantage of it,” she said.

The Duke laughed and gazed at her with false affection.

“That is all I need to know, Miss Seabrook. Hearing that I inspire you to write your stories is wonderful. And you may continue to write of course, once we are married,” he said, looking at her mother and father and then back to Lydia with a warning in his gaze.

She needed to do better about keeping up the appearance of their arrangement. Lydia sensed that, should she fail to convince her mother and father that she wanted this, the Duke would follow through on his threats.

Of course, he was unaware of the fact that Lydia’s mother already knew. Still, she was remaining quiet about it and Lydia was grateful. It

gave her more time to figure out what she was doing and how she might be able to get through all of this.

“Yes, because you are so generous,” Lydia said. “I will be able to write because I am marrying a man who knows how important it is to me.”

The statement was false and painful, but once she got it out, Lydia felt relief. At least she wouldn’t have to lie forever. Once the Duke was appeased, she could share how much she detested him.

“Well, I am simply delighted that we are all here together. Soon enough we will be celebrating a wedding and, after that, my darling little girl will no longer be here,” her father said, getting somewhat emotional at the thought.

“You need not worry, Father. I have a feeling that I will be around to visit far more than you can imagine,” she said, knowing it was true. There was no chance at all that she would live with the Duke at all times. Any chance she had, she would come home to be with her father and mother. It did not matter if they were in the townhouse or the country estate, she would come to be with them.

“Nonsense, you will want to be with your husband always,” her father said.

Lydia smiled tersely.

“Oh, Father, you underestimate how much I adore you and Mother. Believe me, you will see me often.”

And Lydia fully intended that it would be so. Nothing would stop her from escaping the Duke whenever she could, even if it was only for days at a time.

In the morning, Lydia found her father already in the dining room at breakfast. He looked at her with suspicion in his eyes and, perhaps, a bit of disappointment.

“Lydia, I am glad that you are up. I wanted to speak with you about something,” he said.

Her heart started to pound a little bit faster. Every time her father

wanted to talk to her about something, it ended up being about the Duke and she wanted only to have some rest from having to think about him in that moment.

“Father, must we discuss it now? I would like to enjoy my breakfast before we talk about something serious and possibly quite unpleasant,” she said.

“I fear that this cannot wait. It is about the Duke. Lydia, I was not happy with how you spoke to him yesterday evening. He is going to be your husband and you must show him respect. You were talking far too much about coming to stay with your mother and myself,” he said.

“That is because I wish to be with you both as often as possible,” Lydia said.

“Well, that is not how it works within marriage. Once you are married, your spouse is the most important person in the world for you. I know that you must be anxious about getting married, but you cannot go around saying that you would rather stay at home with your parents than be with your husband,” he said.

“I understand, Father. At least Mother knows what it is like,” she said, letting her father think she was merely referring to the anxieties of marriage.

“Yes, well, there is more. You see, I want you to think about how you treat the Duke because he is going to be your husband very, very soon,” he said.

“I have nearly a month, Father. I want to spend as much time on my own as possible before then,” Lydia said.

“Well, that is not quite true either. First, when you are about to marry someone, you must spend a good amount of time with them so you know them well,” he began.

“I know him well enough,” Lydia said, taking a sip of tea and staring into the cup.

“I am not so sure about that. You see, Lydia, you do not have nearly a month before you marry him,” her father said.

Lydia froze. She didn’t know what he was talking about but she

wished she could run from the room before he explained.

“What I mean to say is that the Duke wants to marry you right away and he has gone to great lengths to ensure that it happens,” he said.

“What do you mean by that, Father? What lengths? Why would he want to marry me any sooner than we already agreed on?” she asked.

“Because he cares for you a great deal and wants to enjoy your matrimony together. You see, Lydia, he is a good man and he just wants to be a good husband as well,” he said.

“I do not understand. You said that we are getting married sooner?” she asked, her voice squeaking with the question. It was the worst news yet. Of all the awful things that had happened, even one day sooner was too soon.

“He has obtained a special license for the marriage. You will be marrying within two weeks, Lydia,” he told her.

The entire room seemed to crash in on Lydia. She couldn't believe what her father had said. How could she possibly be marrying that awful man in just two weeks? It was more than she could stand to think about. Who had agreed to this and why had they not asked her first?

“Father, I cannot marry him in two weeks. It was supposed to be a year and then I agreed to a month. But two weeks? That is too soon and I was never told any of this. Why is this license even needed? Why is the wedding being rushed like this?” she demanded to know.

“Lydia, calm yourself. Why are you so upset? He is your betrothed. You knew that you would be marrying him. I thought you would be happy to know that it is coming sooner. Besides, the Duke and I both agree that the sooner the better. It is a good thing, my dear,” he said. “This is the best way to achieve the desired outcome.”

“The desired outcome?” she asked in anger.

“Yes, Lydia. You and the Duke are better off marrying as quickly as possible,” he said.

Just then, Lydia's mother entered the room and immediately tensed.

“What is it?” she asked. “Has something happened?”

Lydia looked up at her and then bitterly at her father.

“Let him tell you. I can hardly bear to say it aloud,” Lydia said.

“Good heavens, and here I thought you would be relieved. Lydia, why did you agree to marry the Duke in a month if you are going to make all of this so difficult? What is the matter with you? Do you wish to marry him or not?” her father asked.

Lydia was stuck. She looked at her mother, who opened her mouth as if to speak, but Lydia gave her the slightest nod to warn her against it.

No matter how desperately Lydia wanted to beg her father to let this go, she couldn't. She knew that it was the only way to protect Darius and if she had to suffer marrying the Duke sooner, she would do so.

“Yes, Father. You are right. I am anxious about getting married and I apologise if I have been difficult. There is a part of me that is not yet ready and, because of that, I have not always behaved the way I ought to. Forgive me for embarrassing you. I will try to be more gracious with the Duke,” Lydia said.

“Thank you, my dear. That is all I wanted to hear from you. Very well, now. You and your mother should enjoy breakfast. I think I will take my tea outside and enjoy the morning air,” he said.

With that, Lydia's father stood and departed from the dining room. Lydia looked at her mother who was clearly upset by this as well.

“Lydia, my dear...”

“Please, Mother,” she said. “Let us just accept it and move on. There is nothing more to be done. The more I fight, the worse it gets. No matter what I do, things seem to be out of my control and I have to accept that this is the only way to protect Darius. I have to keep trying. Even if it means that I will marry the Duke now,” she said.

But Lydia's heart ached at the thought. Indeed, there was nothing she could do. She could only wait for her freedom to end.[35]

Critique:

Excellent job on this. I think it follows as closely to the plot outline as

possible, so I don't have any suggestions on that front. I do think that the mother's objection to her daughter's marriage should come in a bit more often in the first two parts, if only to show her naturally jumping on that vein when Lydia's really upset about marrying the duke/upset over not being able to marry Darius. Other than that, the pacing is excellent, the spots where you put in the conflict is nicely done—it feels like a natural progression of tension from the Duke getting pressured more and more into getting the money, and in turn, pressuring Lydia more and more to marry him. Though I do wonder how Darius is going to save his own skin when he assaults the duke first...unless he's banking on the duke getting in trouble with his debt before it happens...I guess we'll find out in the climax!

I also appreciate you adding in showing Lydia's writing (and Darius' poem!), I hope that's something you think about adding more into the first two parts, just to keep that theme going up through the end.

Chapter Thirty

Darius sat down at his desk to compose yet another letter for Lydia. Although he had heard her words and knew that she claimed not to care for him, he couldn't imagine that she didn't care about getting her book published either. It was impossible. Lydia had worked too hard on the book to simply let it go like this.

Knowing he couldn't stop trying to reach her, Darius began to write, nearly reciting the same things he had said in previous letters.

Dear Miss Seabrook,

Forgive me for writing to you again. I understand that you have little interest in hearing from me, but this is most urgent. I do not know if you have received my previous letters, informing you that your work is to be published by my dear friend's publishing company. They want your novel, Miss Seabrook.

As you must know, this is something to be dealt with quickly. In order to publish the work, they need to speak with you, to have you sign papers, and to get started on any requested edits. The people of London want to read your work and that means you need to come at once and meet with them.

I understand that you have no desire to speak with me again and, if that continues to be your wish, I shall honour it. However, you have an opportunity that many men and women only dream of. You have the chance to set your work before the entire country and I should hate for you to miss it.

As I have written you many letters already and have heard nothing from you in reply, I must confess that I am worried. I fear that you are not receiving these letters, that someone has prevented you from answering them. If this is so, I know not what to do. If, however, you are receiving these letters and wish for me to stop writing them, please reply and inform me so that I may leave you alone.

This is truly an exciting thing, Miss Seabrook. I should hate for you to miss the chance to see your work in print.

Moreover, I know that this may mean nothing at all to you, but I wish for you to know that I miss you. Whether that matters to you or not, I cannot help it. I find my heart constantly longing to come and see you, to tell you that, whatever your feelings for me, I still think of you often and I care for you greatly.

As much as I should like to come to you, I understand it is impossible. Nevertheless, you will remain in my heart always, even unto my death. I have included a poem for you, something by which I should like to express what more I feel for you.

Once and Always Your Friend,

Darius Frost

Darius took a deep breath, wondering if he had been too bold with the letter. There was still a chance that Lydia would be angered by him, by the fact that he had insisted on writing to her again. Maybe she was sitting in her home, tearing his previous letters to pieces, wishing that he would simply be done with his attempts to woo her.

Still, Darius could not stop. He cared far too much for Lydia. Even as he tried to view her yet again through the eyes of a man who could never come near to a noblewoman, Darius knew that she was not so callous as she had been to him that day when she sent him away. There had to be a reason behind it, just as there had to be a reason why she was not responding to him now.

Then again, if there was no reason, he would find out soon. Perhaps he was a fool to have hope. And if that was so, he was about to discover that she had no need of him at all and his life was nothing to her. Indeed, if Lydia didn't reply or if she replied only by telling him to leave her alone, that would answer all of his questions—and all of his fears.

He folded the paper and then read the poem one last time, trying to discern whether or not it was wise to send it.

Climbing every step and tower,

Through the shade and through the bower,

Longing just to meet my flower,

Even now in this dark hour.

Through the woods and over trees,

Sailing upon the crafty seas,

In the heat or in the freeze,

I see her and fall to my knees.

There amidst the brightness of day,

I come to take her aft away,

And if she choose instead to stay,

My own heart, then, I must betray.

I must leave her there behind,

Even if it torture my mind,

For if this be the fate I find,

I am but a man, wretched and blind.

It was not the happiest poem Darius had written, but it was one full of his soul, a poem that he hoped would tell Lydia exactly how desperately he longed to be near her again. And if she truly was finished with him, she would have to reply. She would have to tell him that this was the end and they could no more dream of a life together.

If she did not respond? Well, then, Darius believed that it would only be the result of someone trying to keep them apart.

He tied the two papers together with a slender blue ribbon and set out for her family's estate with nothing but this small hope in his heart. Although he knew that Alistair wanted him to let go before he was hurt even more, Darius had to try this once more. If not, the book

would be cast aside...just as he had been.

As he made his way through the city, Darius passed by so many places that now reminded him of Lydia. He passed by the park where they had stopped to observe others. He passed by the shop they had gotten tea and biscuits. He passed by the Thames and recalled that day along the shore when she had been swept up. It all seemed so long ago and he could scarcely believe that it had all taken place within the past few months. Such a short time for them to have gotten so close and found that their hearts drew to one another so quickly.

Well, for him it had been that way. Still, he was confused by Lydia's intentions. Whatever they were, Darius thought she had once loved him and meant it.

Before long, Darius reached the street with the townhouse he had come to so many times over the past couple of months. Just as he was approaching, the footman came rushing from down the road.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Frost. May I help you?" he asked.

"Yes, I am leaving this for Miss Seabrook," Darius said.

"Ah, yes. I shall give her your letter, Mr. Frost," the footman said.

"Please do. And tell her that it is very important. I am not sure if she has been reading the letters or casting them aside, but if you will also inform her that her book is to be published, I would be very grateful," Darius told him, thinking it might be the best solution since Lydia hadn't been willing to reply to Darius.

"Oh, that is very exciting. I am certain that she will be thrilled, as will her mother. You may trust me with the task, Mr. Frost," he declared.

"Thank you," Darius replied, smiling.

The footman's own smile faltered for only a flash before it was recovered. Something about it left Darius uncomfortable. Had Lydia told him to get rid of the letters? Was this man only trying to make Darius think he was being acknowledged?

Whatever it was, Darius didn't want to consider that it was possible. Instead, he took the encounter for what it was. Surely, the footman would get Lydia the letter and she would see it and be thrilled that her

book was going to be published. She would be so thankful that she would come back to Darius and be willing to work with him for all the edits. Even if their affection was not rekindled, at least they could do this together.

“Forgive me, but is there something else?” the footman asked.

“Hmm? Oh, no, nothing,” Darius said.

“Very well. I am sure that Miss Seabrook will be sad that she missed you, but she is not here at the moment. She is with her mother and father, visiting the Duke of Moreland. As I am sure you know, she has grown quite fond of him of late,” the footman said, a warning under his tone to let Darius know that he must not think anything different.

“Indeed, I am aware,” he replied.

“Excellent. Then you ought to be sure that she will have me bring you a letter in reply once she has returned. I am sure that, this time, she will wish to respond,” the footman said, his tone now laced with gentle mocking.

Darius swallowed, understanding what the man meant. He was referring to the fact that Lydia had not yet responded and reminding Darius of that. It was true. She had said nothing thus far and that was a sign she would not do so again.

“Indeed,” he said. “I shall be off.”

He couldn't help looking up at the window which he knew to be Lydia's bedroom. Although he wished that he might catch a glimpse of her, she was nowhere to be found. Darius's heart sunk, but he knew that there had been no reason to hope. After all, she was probably busy with people far more important than he.

Leaving the townhouse behind, Darius departed for home, knowing in his heart that he had tried his best. Whatever was to happen in the days to come, he at least knew that much.

Two days had passed since Darius left the letter at Lydia's home and he had heard nothing in reply. Certainly she would have responded by now?

His heart sank with the realisation that Lydia must have been ignoring the letters. More than likely, she was throwing them away without even having read them. After all, why would she bother? She had told him that she no longer wanted any acquaintance with him. It made sense that she would try to be rid of him now, despite his efforts to remain close to her.

Although he ached to know what was happening, Darius settled into the routine of searching for a new employer. He had a few potential leads, but was not making as much of an effort as he would under different circumstances. Indeed, the only reason he was trying at all was because of Alistair and his family.

When a letter did arrive at him home, Darius was full of delight and wonder, thinking that Lydia had written back to him after all. But when he saw that it was a request for his services, Darius took a deep breath and resigned himself to the fact that he needed this position and he would accept it.

He sat at his desk and wrote a reply, thanking Lord Brower for the position, saying he would be delighted to tutor the man's two sons. The money was going to be excellent, even better than he had received while working for Lord Bregman, but it still meant very little when he considered the fact that he would no longer be working for the sake of the woman he loved.

He would do his best to tutor and train these young men, to put up with whatever insolence they might be inclined to show. After all, he would not likely be so fortunate as before, finding someone who was kind despite the class difference.

As for Lydia, it was clear to him now that he would never see her again. She had no intention of ever writing to him. Thus, he had done all that he could and the next step was to move forward. Although it would be difficult, he had little other choice and the only motivation he could find was the desperation to take care of Alistair, Elizabeth, and the children.

Darius decided to go out and send his reply, as well as visiting his brother and informing him of this good news. Alistair would be thrilled and that was important. Giving them the peace of mind to know they would be taken care of mattered a great deal to Darius in that moment, particularly after he had been dismissed over a week

before then.

He donned his hat and set out from the home, eager to see Alistair for more than just a chance to share his good news. He also wanted comfort for the sadness he still felt. Even if he had to accept that nothing would ever be the same, he would do so. But he would only be able to get by if he knew with confidence that Lydia would not regret this decision.

Although Darius could accept that she didn't love him, he still found it troubling that she could have any feelings at all towards the Duke. And if she had felt such a dramatic change of heart that she truly wanted to be his wife, then she had never been the woman he'd believed her to be.

The sun was fading fast on the horizon of the city and the sky opened overhead, releasing a torrent of rain on the lonely, broken-hearted man who walked the empty streets of London. Without the woman he loved, there was no longer any hope to be had.

Chapter Thirty-One

The Duke of Moreland

“Your Grace?”

The voice came out of the darkness as the man slid into the coach next to the Duke.

He needed to know if things were all going according to plan, but could not meet with Mr. Henry in plain view. Instead, keeping the coach at the end of the street after dark had been the best way to speak with the man who was assisting him.

“Sit. Be quick about it,” the Duke said.

“Yes, Your Grace. He came by with another letter. I saved it for you just as you asked. I could see that the young man was quite sad about it,” Mr. Henry said.

“And you think I care about his sadness?” the Duke asked.

“No, Your Grace. That was not what I meant. Only...only I thought you might like to know about it,” Mr. Henry said.

“Indeed, well, you must know that I am perfectly fine with his sadness and I care nothing for it. If he is sad, he ought not to have tried to take what was mine. Now, that woman is going to be my wife,” the Duke said.

“And once you have the dowry? That is when you will pay me for this?” Mr. Henry asked.

The Duke turned to him in a snap, angry that he was being questioned at all by this lowly household servant. Did he not know who the Duke of Moreland was? Did he not know what an important man? Did he not know that someone in his position ought never question a duke if he wished to keep his position and his happiness?

“Young man, whatever has led you to think you may question me in this way? You may stop it now. I am not to be trifled with, do you understand? You are a mere simpleton and you mean nothing in my life. I will give you the money because it is a shame that Lord Seabrook does not pay for loyalty. But beyond that, you must not question me,” he said.

Mr. Henry looked down and the Duke realised immediately that the man was having second thoughts. The Duke exhaled slowly, trying to calm himself and recover his charming nature that he had often used in times past to convince others to do his bidding.

“You must forgive me. That was rude. I am quite distraught, you see. The idea that I might lose the woman I love to her tutor has me acting not quite myself. I am sure you can agree that I am not acting like a gentleman, but I am simply grieving. I hope that you shall forgive me in time,” the Duke said.

“Y-yes, Your Grace. Of course,” Mr. Henry said.

“Thank you for being so gracious. I hope that I may one day have your patience. For now, I simply ask that you maintain our little arrangement and know that the moment I have the dowry, the first payment I shall make is to you,” the Duke promised.

“Thank you, Your Grace,” Mr. Henry said.

“And thank you, for your service and for the letter,” he replied.

With that, Mr. Henry scurried from the coach and made his way back down the street. The Duke untied the blue ribbon and found two sheets of paper. One was a letter and the other a poem.

“Hmm. So it is with poetry that he wins her heart? Indeed, perhaps I must write her one as well then,” he said to himself.

The Duke could not see well, even with the faint light coming in through the window. He decided to take the pages home and to write Miss Seabrook a letter of his own. He would write a poem for her and it would surely be far better than the tutor’s. After all, it was strange enough that a poor man like the tutor would even know how to read, much less that he could craft anything decent upon a page. At least, not so like a duke.

With that, the Duke was ready to move onward, happy to know that he had been successful at intercepting yet another communication. He would add it to the other three letters that the tutor had written to Miss Seabrook.

And one day, the Duke predicted, he would be very angry with his wife over something. Surely, they would have a quarrel or two at times. In the future, when all hope of turning back was gone, he would give her these letters. He would show her the life she could have had. And he would watch her cry, remembering that, once more, he was in complete control.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Lydia's heart ached as she looked once more at the calendar she kept at her vanity.

Just three days.

Three days until she would be the Duchess of Moreland. Three days until her wedding. Three days until she had tied herself to a man she firmly detested and wished to be rid of.

But there was nothing more that she could do to escape it. If Darius was going to have any chance at happiness, at success, this was to be her fate and she would accept it willingly.

Since the announcement that she would be marrying him quite soon, Lydia had done her best to withstand her encounters with the Duke. Mostly, she just avoided him. Twice when he had come by, she feigned illness and both times, her father caught her sitting at her desk and writing. Knowing that she could not get away with always pretending to be ill, she had been wise to space out the days when she would refuse to see him.

Fortunately, this day was one of the days she would allow herself.

Still, there had been other times when the Duke came around and Lydia simply told him that she was very busy trying to finish her writing before the wedding and she had begged him, when her mother and father were not in the room, to let her have some peace without him for a day or two.

He would always agree and then return the following day, grumbling about how she had sent him away. At times, she felt that his attempts to manipulate her were the result of his arrogance, but at other times, he would make a snide remark about his mother and Lydia would know that she must be quite controlling. Was it possible that marrying Lydia was his way of now having control?

And yet, it always seemed to come back to the money. That was what he clearly desired most.

Lydia was frightened by the thought of marrying the Duke of Moreland, but she was more frightened by the chance of Alistair's family starving and it was their life that kept her motivated in moving forward.

There was a knock at her door and Lydia trudged over to it with the morose posture she had been carrying of late. When she saw one of the footmen standing there before her, she had a strange hope in her heart that he would have a letter from Darius.

"Yes?" she asked.

"Miss Seabrook, I have a letter for you," he told her.

All at once, her heart began to race. Was this it? Perhaps Darius had not been as angry with her as she had assumed. Perhaps his silence had been for another reason. Or, perhaps, this letter would contain all the rage and anger he was carrying around. Regardless, she needed the letter at once.

"Yes, please," she said, hurriedly.

The footman handed it to her and Lydia quickly unfolded the paper. Her heart sank when she saw that it was from the Duke of Moreland rather than Darius.

"Is this all?" she asked, looking at him with sadness.

"What do you mean, Miss Seabrook?" he asked.

"Have you no other letters for me? Nothing?"

"No, Miss Seabrook. There is nothing more. Just this from His Grace, the Duke of Moreland," he replied, standing tall and with an absurdly straight posture.

Lydia paused for a moment, noting that he would not look her in the eye.

"The Duke," she said. "Do you find him to be a good man or a bad

man?"

"Begging your pardon, Miss Seabrook, but I hardly know the man. He is said to be quite noble," he said, his lips pursing for one brief, unguarded moment before he was stiff again. He swallowed with something akin to nervousness and Lydia eyed him a moment longer.

"I see. And would you tell me? Would you be willing to share your opinion or is that dangerous for a man in your position? As you work in the home of a nobleman, are you meant to keep your thoughts to yourself?" she asked him, knowing that she was pushing him further than she ought to.

"Lady Seabrook, a man in my position knows so little of nobility that we scarcely ever form opinions on great men and women. After all, what do we know of those who are among your status?" he asked, challenging her in reply.

It was an excellent means of avoiding the question and Lydia could not fault him for it. Still, she sensed that he was hiding something. But it was something he was clearly unwilling to share and Lydia decided she was safer giving up now than trying to quiz him further.

"Very well," she said. "Thank you for bringing me this letter."

"You are welcome, Miss Seabrook," he replied, turning from her and departing from her doorway in a hurry.

Lydia sat on the bed and read the letter, wishing that she could be anywhere else in that moment. But it was pitiful, the Duke's attempt to appear genuine in his interests, as though Lydia was going to show this to her mother and father as evidence of his care for her.

My Dearest Miss Seabrook,

I am thrilled to know that we shall be married in just three days. I do hope that you are ready for the life ahead of us and that you are as eager as I am to join in matrimony.

Because I know that you are fond of books and poetry, I wrote you a little something.

Beautiful Miss Seabrook,

She likes to read books,

Her hair is light in colour,

And she is pretty as a flower.

If the sun were to shine,

It would shine upon this woman who is now mine,

And she is like a light in the dark,

Whose voice is like a pretty lark.

Miss Seabrook, you are kind,

You are gentle and you are fine,

And I am happy to marry you,

I will be your wish come true.

There you have it. Now you know how dearly I care for you and what you have to look forward to in our future.

Your Betrothed,

The Duke of Moreland

For a long moment, Lydia stared at the page and wondered if this poem was meant as a joke. It was positively dreadful! The language was simple and the images obvious. There was nothing creative about it and his use of rhyme needed dramatic improvement. Then again, Lydia knew, the Duke of Moreland was not truly a poet or a writer and this had all been a part of his ruse to hide the fact that he just wanted her dowry.

But that poem was so appallingly written that Lydia was ready to call an end to the engagement at once. She would never be willing to spend her life with a man who was so lacking in skill. She nearly wanted to show it to her mother so they could mock the Duke and speak about his pitiful work, but Lydia knew that would be quite petty of her. This was more important than simply detesting the Duke. It was about fighting for the life she desired and escaping him.

Yet, how could she escape it? Who would set her free? It was clear that her father saw this as a most advantageous match and she didn't want to disappoint him any more than she wanted all of Darius's suffering to be for nothing.

Her mother was clearly concerned, but she had done nothing to step forward in defense of Lydia. She was constantly opening her mouth to speak in protest, but then remaining silent as though she could say nothing. And in those moments, Lydia knew that her mother was doing so only because Lydia had begged her. She had asked her mother to refrain from putting an end to this, knowing that it would ruin Darius.

She only wished that her mother would at least protect her from having to see the Duke whenever he came around to speak with her.

Lydia decided to throw herself into the only thing that had brought her even the faintest hint of joy lately. She began working on her next piece of writing.

Although no one in the world would ever read these pages, Lydia was determined to write them for the sake of her remaining hope and dignity. If she could just have this little bit of peace to rely on, it would be worth her while.

She struggled as she went along, putting the ink to the page, but still it gave her strength. She had power in this one thing, just this ability to say what she wished and to know that no one could control her. No one could change her words or make them meaningless.

That evening, the maid came for her and Lydia opened the door to see the young woman looking shyly at her.

"Begging your pardon, Miss Seabrook, but your father has sent me to fetch you. He said that the Duke shall be coming by this evening," the maid said.

Lydia did not have the strength to see the Duke of Moreland that evening. She was far too grieved by him to try and greet him politely or have a conversation of any sort.

"Please tell the Duke that I am indisposed," she replied. "Tell him I must keep up my strength for the sake of our wedding and that I have

been very unwell lately.”

“Very well, Miss Seabrook,” the maid replied, taking her leave.

Although it was a small, silly thing, Lydia had also hoped that her constant ‘illness’ would be perceived as dangerous to the Duke. After all, men like him were never willing to marry women who struggled with their health. They were not the sort of men to love beyond such trivial things.

It was only a few minutes later that her father came barging in without bothering to knock.

“Lydia, what are you doing? The maid tells me you are indisposed? I think not. Here you are, writing away as you have been for days. It is rude to refuse to see your intended. You must come and greet the Duke. He will be here soon, I expect,” her father said.

“I am sorry, Father, but I cannot do it. You must tell him that I am unwell,” she replied.

“Unwell? You look perfectly fine to me. What is the matter with you?” he asked.

“Father, I am not feeling well and that is all there is to it,” Lydia replied.

Her father narrowed his eyes and he looked at her with great frustration, shaking his head in anger.

“I cannot abide this. You are always so busy with your writing but that is not the sort of woman you need to be now. You are getting married soon, Lydia. It is appalling that you should waste time and efforts on this silly work. Now, hurry and make yourself presentable. The Duke is coming,” he urged.

“Father, I do not feel well,” Lydia said again, looking up at him through weak eyes as she sat at the desk.

“Nonsense! Hurry up. You need to be quick about it, Lydia. We cannot risk angering the Duke of Moreland. He wants to marry you, but there are many wonderful young women out there who might make him a good deal happier if they do not behave this way. You must show him how important he is to you,” her father said.

"I think the Duke has made up his mind to marry me regardless, Father," she replied.

But Lydia knew she could not hold onto this disobedience. Her father was only going to be angered further if she remained obstinate. From the look in his eyes, she had already gone on for too long without giving into his demands and it was time to relent.

"Very well, Father," Lydia said at last. "I shall make myself presentable."

Still, Lydia took her time. She did not arrive in the parlour until the Duke of Moreland had already been there for nearly half an hour.

"Ah, there you are. I trust you were not wasting time with your writing again, were you?" he mocked.

Lydia did not respond, feeling no motivation to pretend an interest in the Duke. She could feel the eyes of her mother upon her and Lydia looked up only once. There was a deep concern in her mother's gaze. A sadness. A sense that her mother understood the pain that Lydia was feeling, but was not sure how exactly she could help.

At last, Lydia could stand it no longer and excused herself under the pretense of still feeling ill.

"Lydia, you must remain here longer. The Duke has come to see you," her father warned through gritted teeth, maintaining a semblance of a smile in front of the Duke.

"And he shall understand that, as I told you before, I am unwell. If we are to marry in three days, I must rest and find my health," Lydia said again.

With that, she curtsied and departed the room, making her way quickly up the stairs and to her bedroom where she sat at her desk. At first, Lydia picked up her pen to begin writing, but her emotions quickly got the better of her and she began to weep.

The great, heaving sobs were tiring, but she had tried so hard to hold them at bay and could do so no longer. With her face in hands, Lydia allowed herself to curl up in the chair and feel the pain of her circumstance until, at last, the exhaustion overwhelmed her and she

drifted off to sleep.

The sound of Lydia's door gently closing woke her. She looked up and saw that no one was there. Had someone come in? Who had been in her room? Had she imagined it? Or had she really heard it?

At first, she was frightened that it might have been the Duke of Moreland, but Lydia didn't think he would dare come to her room like that. Her mother and father had given him a great many freedoms, but this seemed unlikely. It had probably been a maid or someone.

She looked at her desk in the candlelight and realised that the pages she had been working on were not where she left them. Instead, they were at the corner of the desk, neatly stacked with care.

Lydia had more questions than answers, but decided it was not the time to solve this mystery. For now, she was so tired that it was best she simply slip into her nightgown and go off to sleep.

Chapter Thirty-Three

When Darius answered the door, he expected to see Alistair or, perhaps, Elizabeth. But when Lady Bregman stood before him, his voice caught in his throat and his heart began to race.

“I must speak with you at once, Mr. Frost,” she said with great urgency in her voice. Her eyes were wide and desperate, pleading with him to listen.

“Y-yes. P-please, come in,” he said, ushering her into his home despite the confusion he felt. This was very strange, indeed, and he wondered what could possibly prompt Lady Bregman to come to him like this. It was not proper, nor wise for the two of them to be there alone together.

“Thank you. I am grateful that you are willing to speak with me,” Lady Bregman said, entering his little home.

Darius was embarrassed the she should see his humble dwellings. It was not the sort of place a woman like her would ever come, but she had come nevertheless and he knew it meant offering her all of the comforts he was able.

“Please, sit. Would you like some tea?”

“No, thank you,” she replied. “I have no wish to impose on you and I really have come for a reason and we have very little time.”

“Of course,” Darius said, sitting across from her on a simple, wooden chair. He was still dubious as to why she had come and wondered if something had happened which might cause her to come here.

Had she found out the truth of his feelings for Lydia? There was a chance that she had come to scold him, to tell him to leave her daughter alone or to never again leave a letter as he had been doing. Or, perhaps, she had been the one collecting the letters and was here

to throw them back in his face and remind him that he was a mere pauper in her view.

And yet, Darius remembered that she was also an accomplished author, one whose skill was remarkable and paved the way for her daughter. This woman was not the sort to mistreat Darius or be cruel towards him. They were of the same ilk.

“Your home is lovely,” she complimented with a polite smile. Darius blushed, understanding that she was just trying to be kind. She was so like Lydia that he was nearly taken aback with sadness that she was not Lydia herself.

“Thank you. You are too kind. And what may I do for you?” he asked.

Lady Bregman took a deep breath and sighed, looking down in dismay. She took a moment, as though she knew that this was a dangerous thing to do, as if she feared regrets or repercussions. And yet, Darius could see that she was determined, that whatever had brought her here, she had come with purpose and intent.

“I am worried for my daughter,” she said.

Darius’s heart ached, hearing this. If Lydia was in trouble, he needed to help fix it. But what could he do? And why was Lady Bregman worried? Did Lydia have regrets about the life she had chosen? What would possibly resolve her situation? And was this not what her mother and father wanted for her?

“Why are you worried? What has happened?”

“As you know, my daughter is meant to be marrying the Duke of Moreland soon. This afternoon, actually,” she said.

Darius felt sick. He couldn’t bear to hear more of this, to know that Lydia was so soon to be that man’s wife. It ought to have been at least a few months away rather than being so immediate. Lydia must have changed her mind for some reason, but he could not imagine what it was.

“I was unaware that the wedding would take place so quickly,” he answered, hoping she could not see the pain in his eyes. He looked down and away, thinking this could be her attempt to stop her daughter, or it could be a chance to tell Darius that the marriage was

moving forward and all his attempts to woo Lydia needed to cease at once.

“Indeed, it has been moved forward. I wish that it had not been. And that is why I have come. You see, there are many things you do not know about my daughter and about her reasons for having sent you away,” she said.

At this, Darius felt a wave of relief. Was he finally going to have the answers he had been hoping for? Was there truly a reason for the abandonment he had received at the hands of Lydia?

“Is that so?” he asked, cautiously. Despite what she said, he was still hesitant to get his hopes up and think that there was actually logic behind what Lydia had done. If it turned out that she had made the decision for a reason he didn’t like, it would only break his heart further. And for all he knew, the reason might not explain why she had treated him so flippantly.

“Yes, it is. As it happens, my daughter never wanted you to leave. She never wanted to be rid of you. All she wanted was your safety,” Lady Bregman said.

“My safety?”

“Yes. And while she begged me to secrecy, I feel that it is my burden to unveil this ordeal for your sake and hers. Despite the fact that this is very complicated and there are a great many motives and manipulations that led to this, you should still know whatever I am able to tell you,” she said.

Darius was already overwhelmed, not knowing what she was talking about or why she was being so strange in telling him. Whatever had caused her to hesitate like this, he knew she must have a reason. But if she had come, why would she not just tell him without all this uncertainty?

“I’m afraid that I do not understand. What is it that you want me to know? Begging your pardon, Lady Bregman, but this makes no sense at all,” Darius said.

She took another inhale and looked up towards the ceiling as if searching her thoughts.

“Please understand that I came here today for many reasons. There are things I must tell you, but I also cannot bear to see my daughter suffer like this. I went to her room a few evenings back when I saw how upset she was and when I found her, she was curled up on her chair, asleep, with her cheeks stained from tears. I read the work she had written and it was full of grief and pain. She has scarcely left her room over the past week, working only on one of her writing projects,” she told him.

Darius waited, trying not to push her to tell him answers to all of his questions. He knew that he needed to be patient and give her a chance to explain all she could before he dove into asking. Still, it was very hard. She kept saying things and then leaving it to hang in the air before moving onto something else. When would she simply give him a reason for Lydia’s abandonment?

“It was clear that she has talent. In fact, I think she may be more talented than I ever was. But one thing that struck me was the end of one chapter, a single paragraph that I understood resonated with her own circumstance,” she explained.

“It was not the suffering that bothered her the most. Rather, it was the anticipation of the suffering that would continue until the day she died.”

The words were a knife to Darius, knowing that Lydia must feel this way. Was she anticipating her own suffering? Did she regret her engagement to the Duke of Moreland so desperately? Why had she agreed to marry him to begin with? Darius felt the pull of heroism, desperate to get her out of this if that was what she wished.

“Clearly, my daughter is in pain. I cannot watch her live an entire life with this sadness, you see. That is why I have come. Because she told me about how she feels for you and she told me why it is that she sent you away,” Lady Bregman said.

“I do not understand. She told me that she was mistaken, that she did not love me. At first, I wanted to believe that she did not mean it, but she has not responded to any of my letters, despite very important news. Has she told you about that at least? I did my best to ensure that she had a chance at everything she has always dreamt of,” Darius said.

“She lied to protect you. As for your letters, I do not believe she has received any but from the Duke,” she said, a furrow in her brow. “If

you have been sending her letters, I believe someone must be intercepting them.”

“The footman...” Darius whispered, more to himself than to Lady Bregman. It explained why the man had been strange, why he had left Darius with a strange discomfort as though he was hiding something.

“Mr. Henry? Good heavens, I shall be speaking with him later. If he has something to do with this, that will be the end of his career,” she said with anger.

“There are many things a man will do for money, Lady Bregman. Particularly if he is desperate. Perhaps he was offered more money to keep the letters away than he would be offered to deliver them to your daughter,” Darius reasoned, not knowing why he was defending the footman at all.

“Perhaps, but it shall be dealt with. Anyway, Lydia told me that she loved you. She told me that she wanted to spend her life with you. The Duke of Moreland, however, learned the truth and he told her that he would expose the interest between the two of you and ensure that my husband would send you away without a reference. The Duke intended to ruin you, to be sure that you never again managed to find work,” she explained.

Darius was struck. He could hardly believe it. No wonder Lydia had sent him away! Of course she would not want him to suffer through this, that she would rather be rid of him than put him through this jeopardy. She knew how important it was for him to support his family and she must have done all of this because she was such a selfless young woman. She had been kind and merciful, putting herself through this misery just to protect him and Alistair’s family.

“Why did she not simply tell me? She could have spared us both this pain,” he said.

Lady Bregman laughed and shook her head.

“You are a young man in love. Would you have accepted this without a fight? Would you have simply given up and walked away?” she challenged him.

Darius knew the answer with ease. Of course he would not walk away. He would never be willing to let go of Lydia. She meant everything to

him. She was his whole world. The idea of simply letting go of her was agony. No, he could not do that. Her mother was right.

“You know as well as I do that it would not have been possible for you. Thus, my daughter knew there was nothing more she could do aside from telling you that she wanted you to leave. Because of that, you did so and now she is content knowing that you are safe and your brother’s family may be provided for,” she explained.

“But I cannot abide her unhappiness. She detested the Duke. She was afraid of him. How can she now marry him just to save my reputation?” Darius asked, dismayed by this news.

“She did so because she loves you. She would suffer anything for that. That is both the flaw and the beauty of young love. I gave up my love of writing and my career because I loved the man I came to marry and I wanted a family more than I wanted my work. I could have done both, of course, but I had one priority only. My daughter, likewise, will gladly accept a life of sadness if it means that you have a better life. But you and I will not let her continue in this. We will find a way to get her out of it and we will do all we can to make matters right,” Lady Bregman said.

“What do you mean? How? What may I assist you with to prevent her from further pain? Please, I will do anything,” Darius said with desperation. All he wanted now was to ensure that Lydia was saved, that she didn’t have to marry the Duke of Moreland.

“We have to do whatever is necessary. My husband shall be angry with me, but I care not. Now that I know what grief she is under, I cannot allow myself to be moved by him any longer. It is far more important that I help Lydia and ensure that she does not have to tie herself to the Duke. I care not how much wealth he has, nor how much prestige,” she said.

“Nor do I. There is nothing he can do now that would cause me more pain than watching your daughter make this sacrifice for my sake. My brother shall understand. He will know that I had no choice but to do the right thing,” he said.

“Very well. First, we must work together to stop the wedding. We cannot let the Duke manipulate Lydia and force her into this any longer. You, however, must decide what you are willing to give up. Lydia was going to let go of all her happiness. Are you willing to do

the same?" she challenged.

Darius looked her in the eye and fought off the wave of emotion that threatened him. He knew his answer. He knew that there was nothing in this world that would keep him away from Lydia.

He would never allow her to marry a man that would be so manipulative, a man who would treat her that way before they were even married. Darius knew that he needed to stop the wedding and he cared nothing about his livelihood. Not when it meant he could save Lydia from a future she didn't want.

"Lady Bregman, I would walk through fire and ice to rescue your daughter. I would die a thousand deaths. I would suffer through all the shame and humiliation that I must if it means that she is not forced to marry someone so cruel as the Duke of Moreland," he declared.

Lady Bregman smiled confidently.

"That is all I needed to hear, Mr. Frost," she said, standing with determination. "Now, I do believe we have a wedding to interrupt."

Chapter Thirty-Four

Lydia exhaled slowly, not wanting to take the step through the door.

Where was her mother? There had never been a day when Lydia was more desperate to be with her mother than on this day. It was utterly unfair that she had chosen to rush out with a promise to return, but had no yet done so.

And now?

Now, Lydia found herself standing just outside the church, knowing that she was supposed to step through the door and marry the man she detested more than any other.

The wedding was supposed to be a small, quiet affair. Although Lydia's father had been surprised by this, Lydia was grateful. She hated the thought that anyone might know of her pain and, already, she was going to have to pretend that she was happy to be there. But as she accepted the face that she would have to show herself in front of all those people, Lydia also knew the Duke or Moreland would do whatever was necessary to make a show of all that was about to happen.

Lydia's father came rushing over to her as she stood outside the church with the bouquet of flowers in her hands. He placed his arm around her and held her close.

"My darling girl, I am in awe of this day. How happy I am that you get to marry a man like the Duke, someone who will take care of you always and ensure that you are in the best of health and hands at all times," he said.

Lydia looked up at her father, tears pooling in her eyes. He had betrayed her. He had allowed her to be forced into this. If he were not a man who clung to the wealth and prestige of their life, she might not have to endure this. And there was nothing she could say or do to be free.

"I know you are frightened for some reason, but you did say you wanted to marry the Duke, yes?" he asked her, clearly attempting to encourage a positive response from Lydia.

"Father, I have done only what I must. My own hopes and dreams have not mattered in this from the beginning and I am doing the thing that I know you desire," she answered, unable to lie but also hoping he would see her despair.

"My dear, this truly is the best thing for us all," he said.

"And where is Mother? If this is the best thing, why has she abandoned me now?" Lydia asked.

Her father sighed in dismay.

"I wish I knew, my dear. I have sent the footman out to find her, but she is nowhere to be found. She told me she needed only to borrow a piece of jewelry from Lady Whitmore, but she has not yet returned. Still, we cannot keep everyone waiting. I expect she shall arrive soon," he said, although Lydia could see the anxiety in his eyes.

Had something happened to her mother? Was it possible that she had been injured or that something dreadful had taken place?

Lydia didn't want to think it was possible and she pushed the idea away, instead choosing to have faith that everything would be just fine. After all, given her circumstances, she needed have faith in something, at the very least.

"Come, Lydia. Your betrothed awaits you. You must go to him in a hurry or he will think you have given up on this commitment. Shall we?" her father asked.

Lydia took a deep breath and gave a nod. With that, he opened the door and they stepped forward.

The room was still and quiet, as well as surprisingly dimly lit. The Duke of Moreland had arranged no musicians and the dozen guests present each stood awkwardly to watch Lydia make her way down the aisle.

At the front, she saw the Duke's mother, the Dowager Duchess. But it was the Duke who stood straight before her. And although the tears

blurred her vision, she could still see clearly that he was smiling with that wolfish, desperate grin of his.

He had won the battle. The victory was his and his alone. Lydia had to accept her defeat with no one there to share in her misery. She could only accept this fate and give herself to be married.

Each step was agony and she struggled against her fear as it told her to turn around and run. Nevertheless, she kept walking, hoping that the end would come soon enough and she would no longer have to accept the anticipation of her misery. She would finally be living in it.

Lydia was halfway to her groom when the door burst open behind her. The shock of it in the stillness of the dim room made her turn with a yelp.

The bright sun cast a silhouette of two figures coming into the church. Whomever they were, they clearly had a purpose. And as the church doors closed behind them, Lydia was shocked to see her mother and Darius with desperation in their eyes.

“Stop!” Darius shouted.

“What are you doing here?” the Duke of Moreland hissed in rage.

“Madeleine?” Lydia’s father asked, evidently stunned to see her mother there with the tutor.

“Alfred, wait. You cannot let Lydia marry that man,” she said, firmly.

Lydia’s father scoffed, but Darius stepped forward once more.

“Lydia, your mother told me everything. I cannot let you marry the Duke,” he said.

“How dare you? Speaking to my daughter by her Christian name? What is the matter with you? Who are you to come in here and stop a wedding? Be gone with you!” Lydia’s father shouted.

“Yes! Get out!” the Duke echoed.

“Please, Alfred. You must hear what has been going on. Lydia mustn’t marry the Duke. Just listen to Mr. Frost. He will tell you what has happened and Lydia can confirm it all,” her mother said.

Lydia looked to her father, who was clearly confused and angry. Still, he paused before allowing himself to dwell in his anger. He turned to Darius with threatening eyes, waiting to hear what was going on.

“You cannot be serious,” the Duke said to him.

“I want to hear them out. I cannot imagine why they would do this, but I must know,” he said, turning to Darius.

“Lord Seabrook, I never intended to ruin this arrangement as I know you were very eager for it, but I have learned that the situation is far more dire than I realised. As it is, for the safety of your daughter, you cannot allow her to marry a man who has ill intentions with her,” Darius said.

“What are you speaking of? How do you know his intentions?” he asked.

“Enough of this!” the Duke of Moreland shouted. “Are you going to let him continue like this? Have I not earned your trust by now? Why are you entertaining this foolish boy?”

“I am entertaining his words because it is important for me to know the man I am allowing my daughter to marry. If you have any impure intentions, I must know at once. My daughter’s future depends upon it,” he said. “Now enough from you! Let the boy speak.”

“Thank you, my lord,” Darius said.

Lydia held her breath, not knowing what could come of this. Was her father going to listen? Would he relent? Or was it all just a mistake? She couldn’t imagine this ending well, but she hoped nonetheless that everything would be all right.

Her mother drew her near, holding her close and blocking Lydia from the Duke of Moreland.

“The Duke of Moreland manipulated Miss Seabrook into accepting his proposal,” Darius announced, causing wide eyes amongst all the guests, including the Duke’s own mother.

“But how?” her father asked.

The guests started whispering to one another, clearly intrigued by this bit of scandal and wanting to know more about what had caused this entire fray. After all, it was the most interesting thing that could happen at a wedding, was it not? Surely the drama was beyond what anyone else might have imagined!

But Lydia hated that it was her own wedding that had become the center of this. She wanted the Duke to face consequences for his actions, but wished she could hide in that moment so that no one would think to look in her direction whilst all of this took place. After all, who was she to garner this sort of attention?

“Lord Seabrook, the Duke discovered a way to blackmail your daughter, a way in which he might convince her to do whatever he wished, even against her will,” Darius said.

“I cannot imagine that. My daughter has never done anything questionable,” her father insisted, clearly embarrassed that the people in the church might think otherwise.

“No, Lord Seabrook, your daughter is of the utmost character. However, the Duke discovered that she and I have come to care for one another and he understood that such a thing would be seen by you as rather detrimental to your status in society,” Darius said, boldly declaring the truth.

Lydia couldn't help smiling when she heard him speak those words, knowing that he wasn't in the least bit ashamed. Indeed, he appeared rather happy about the chance to tell her father about the fact that they were in love. In turn, Lydia was thrilled as well.

She waited for her father to reply, expecting him to rage with the shock of it, but he seemed instead to be completely at a loss for words. He looked between his wife, Lydia, Darius, and the Duke, as if waiting for someone to give him a full explanation and make all of this make sense.

There was nothing to make sense of it. The fact was, the Duke was a horrible, evil man. He would never be willing to take care of Lydia and now her father knew it. At last, he would be able to protect her from the Duke, even if he was not happy about her love for Darius. She trusted that he would never make her marry someone who was so willing to manipulate her.

“You cannot continue listening to this drivel. This man is a fool and he clearly has an obsession with your daughter, Lord Seabrook. Tell him to go away!” the Duke demanded. “It is the only way this marriage can continue forward as you and I both wish for it to. You must send him out into the streets for coming in here and making a mockery of this ceremony.”

But still, her father appeared confused by all that was happening. It was in that moment that Darius seemed to take his chance.

He walked over to Lydia and looked her in the eye. She breathed a sigh of relief, still leaning into her mother. This was the only hope she had for happiness in the future. If she could just spend her life with Darius, everything would be well. But how to make it happen? How to convince her father that this was right?

“Lydia, I am happy to take whatever risk is necessary. The Duke may do as he pleases with me, but I ask that you would care for yourself at the very least. Please, do not marry this man. He will not take care of you. He will do everything within his power to ruin you,” Darius said.

“Stop it! Who are you to declare my intentions? Will you not just leave? Must I drag you out of this church myself?” the Duke demanded.

“You may do no such thing. All you may do is let Miss Seabrook be free. You may ensure that nothing happens to her, that her reputation remains as pure as she is. You have no choice in the matter now. You have been exposed and there is no one who will defend you,” Darius said.

“You know nothing of the man that I am! And you say that no one shall defend me? I am a duke! All men wish they could have my favour and I will not hold it back from those who aid me now in the midst of this nonsense,” he insisted.

“But why?”

The simple, quiet question came from Lydia’s father and she and Darius both looked up at him. He looked at Darius with curiosity.

“Why is the Duke so insistent upon marrying Lydia?” he asked.

“At first, I assumed that it was because she is the loveliest woman who

ever lived,” Darius said, flashing a quick smile at Lydia, who blushed in turn. “But then, your wife had the clever idea of asking the one man we believed to be under his employ.”

“It is true, Alfred,” Lydia’s mother said. “I spoke with Mr. Henry, our footman. He confessed everything. The Duke hired him to ensure that Mr. Frost’s letters never arrived with Lydia. He said that the Duke promised to pay him once he had the dowry. You see, as it happens, the Duke of Moreland is in great debt. The dowry for his marriage to Lydia would more than cover the costs of those debts, while still allowing him money leftover for whatever purposes he saw fit.”

This was the moment when Lydia finally saw real fury in her father’s eyes.

“It is not true!” the Duke demanded.

In the midst of the standoff, Darius returned his attention to Lydia once more and he hurriedly begged her.

“Please, do not marry him,” he said again.

Overjoyed that Darius had come for her and knowing that she truly would not have to marry the Duke of Moreland, Lydia stripped off the veil she wore and threw it to the floor. Never again would she have to live hidden away because of that selfish, awful man.

With the veil thrown to the floor, she knew that the future was before her. As Darius stood, brave and strong despite the overwhelming odds they had been fighting, she could live with the joy and peace of knowing the rest of her life would belong to him. No matter what her father might say, no matter how angry the Duke would be, she was going to spend her days with the man who had fought for her and loved her when things had grown to be impossible.

“Nothing would make me marry him now. My life is free and that is all because of you. So, you have your wish, Darius. Nothing could convince me that I must be his,” Lydia said. “Nothing.”

Chapter Thirty-Five

Lydia had made up her mind and Darius could not have been any happier. Knowing that she would be free from the engagement, that she would have her life on her own terms, that was the greatest joy he could imagine.

It had been a strange moment, trying to explain all that had happened and yet still ensure a happy outcome, but every moment was worth it to Darius. All he needed now was a chance to ask Lydia to marry him, to get her father's permission, and to make her his wife.

"Enough!"

The shout echoed throughout the sanctuary, louder than it had yet. The Duke had repeated his demand again and again, but this time, everyone fell silent. Although Darius felt the same joy he had a moment before, he also felt a sense of foreboding. After all, he had intruded on a wedding and it was time to face the consequences of that. He was not merely trying to gain Lydia's hand or her father's approval, he was also trying to stop a duke and that was a very difficult thing to do.

"Please, Your Grace..." the vicar said, awkwardly trying to calm the Duke of Moreland. "This is a house of God and I do believe that we must remain sensible. This cannot continue in here."

But the Duke shot the vicar an angry glare, one that made it clear he still had work to do on his own behalf. Everyone in the sanctuary remained silent as the Duke took long, slow strides down from the front of the church. He looked at each of the few guests, glaring at them for not coming to his defense.

One woman in particular looked humiliated and Darius assumed that she must be the Duke's mother. They had a few similar features and it would certainly make sense for her to be humiliated by her son's behaviour.

At last, the Duke stood before Darius, his head held high with false dignity, an air of rage stinking around him. It seemed that he did not intend to go down without a fight.

“Why have you come here?” he asked in a deep growl.

“I do believe that I have made my intentions clear,” Darius said. “I learned that you were forcing Miss Seabrook to marry you although you do not love her. You wanted only her dowry. And because of that, I had no choice but to come here and stop you.”

“Why do you care about her? What is she to you? Just some pretty noblewoman to latch onto? You think she would ever concede to marry you or that her father would allow it? There is no reason a woman like her would marry someone poor and worthless such as yourself,” he said.

“I may appear worthless, but I have a great many abilities that will enable me to support myself. In case you have forgotten, your father once relieved my father of his duties. The reason was because of my own father’s wits. But your father still had money because of his dukedom and he had no reason to fear,” Darius said.

“And?” the Duke scoffed.

“And through my wits, I shall find another way to provide for myself and my family. But you? Now that you have squandered all the wealth belonging to your title, now that you have done nothing to earn more? What are you going to do when no woman in England is willing to marry you? How will you move on? How will you ensure that you do not end up in the poorhouse as a wasted pauper?” Darius asked him, looking the Duke straight in the eye.

At that, the Duke’s restraint was dismantled. Darius felt it all happen so slowly, although he knew that it was quick. There had not been time to move out of the way as the Duke’s fist launched forward, smashing directly into Darius’s nose.

And the moment the contact was made, everything sped up once more.

Darius felt his body crash to the floor and he looked up to see the worry in Lydia’s eyes, the way she fell to his side. He heard the gasps

and remarks of shock from the guests. He saw the snide grin on the Duke's face as he was so pleased with himself in that moment.

But once the uproar started, it filled Darius's ears just as he felt the wave of pain wash over him.

The guests began to flee, clearly not wishing to remain there with such an unstable man who was lost to his rage. And when the vicar seemed to be the only one willing to approach the Duke, even Darius was worried for him. After all, there were not many men who would harm a man of God, but this was one of the few men who might.

"Leave this church at once! You have disrespected the house of God and you will not be allowed to stay here!" the vicar shouted with passion, looking around the lovely sanctuary that he maintained.

"You saw what happened! He was the one in the wrong! Send this madman out!" the Duke demanded, pointing at Darius.

"Be gone!" the vicar shouted with such volume that Darius was shocked. Such a meek and mild-mannered gentleman was rare to use such a tone, but Darius was thrilled that he would not allow the Duke to stay in such a state of fury.

The Duke turned to his mother, one of the last remaining guests in the sanctuary, but she simply shook her head in dismay and turned her back on him, dismissing his actions.

Still, despite all that had happened, the Duke appeared unwilling to go. His stubbornness was undeniable and Darius wished with all his heart that he could convince the man to simply give up and let go, to accept his defeat.

But there were few men in the world who would do such a thing and he knew well that the Duke was not one of them.

"I will not leave," he said, more to himself than to anyone else. "I will not go! I will stay and I will reclaim what is mine! This wedding will continue. No matter what anyone says, I am supposed to marry this woman and I demand that it be done. Vicar, come! You will marry us because I will it!"

"I will not perform this ceremony," the Vicar declared.

“It must happen. And if you will not do it, then I shall find someone else who is willing. Miss Seabrook is *going* to be my wife and no one will stop that from happening. No one! I will it! Her father wills it as well. If you think you can stand against a duke and a lord, you are wrong!”

“No.”

Once more, Darius was surprised by the strange, quiet calm in Lord Seabrook’s voice. Through all of the drama, all of the chaos, there was no reason for him to remain so at peace, despite the Duke of Moreland’s declarations.

But he did.

Darius leaned against Lydia and she tried to help him up, but in that moment, it was the time for Lord Seabrook to defend his daughter as he ought to have done a very long time ago.

Instead of seeking after the title of Duchess for Lydia, he was finally ready to seek out whatever was in her best interest. It was such a relief to see this and to know that, at last, she would have the life she had always deserved. With all the trials they had passed through, she simply wanted to be happy and that was all Darius wanted for her. Perhaps, now, she would finally have that chance.

“What do you mean? You dare to tell me no? You gave me your word. You said that your daughter would marry me and now, here you are, taking it back? What sort of man are you? I have never heard of a true gentleman giving his daughter’s hand only to take it away again,” the Duke said.

Darius was afraid that Lord Seabrook really would reconsider. He was quiet, taking a long pause, clearly measuring his words before he answered the Duke. It was then that Darius began to wonder if there was still a risk that Lord Seabrook would do the wrong thing, that he would allow the Duke to marry Lydia.

“I will do whatever I must if it means that Lydia is safe from you. I care nothing about what intentions you had. I do not care if it was a matter of the dowry or if it was because of her beauty. What I care about is the fact that you did not love her, and yet you demanded to marry her. Now, I see what a fool I was. I was wrong to have tried so hard to defend you and to enable you this chance. You took advantage

of her vulnerable position and you mistreated her. No, this ceremony will never happen. You will not marry my daughter,” Lord Seabrook said.

Darius looked at Lydia, who had tears of pride in her eyes. It was clear that she had never been so happy from a decision made by her father, but also for the fact that he had chosen to stand against the things society would deem as a success or pride. Instead, he was looking out for what was right. He was doing what was best for her.

The Duke appeared to be in a panic as he realised that this loss was final. If Lord Seabrook would not allow the wedding to continue, he had no hope at all. He had lost his only real ally in this arrangement all along.

“My daughter will never marry a man like you,” Lord Seabrook continued. “She will never marry a man who would manipulate another human. You have held Mr. Frost’s welfare hostage in order to receive Lydia’s dowry. That is not the action of a man, but of a greedy coward.”

“You do not know me,” the Duke said.

“No, indeed, I do not. I thought my daughter was going to marry a nobleman. But you are not noble. And you, I expect, shall soon be in a debtor’s prison where you belong,” Lord Seabrook said.

Darius nodded in confirmation of this as it was consistent with what he had learned from Mr. Henry. Lord Seabrook was able to make the connection and know why the Duke had been so desperate to hurry the marriage along.

“If I am thrown into the prison, it will not be for long. And when I am free, you shall have no choice but to remain cautious. You and your family? You are worth nothing to me. I was a fool to think that dowry could actually make me happy when it meant I would have to marry that girl of yours,” he said.

“Yes, well, my daughter can be stubborn,” Lord Seabrook said with a smile. He turned to glance at Lydia for a moment before finishing his thought. “But I suppose that is a trait that may be handled only by a worthy gentleman.”

Darius grinned, knowing full well that he could handle Lydia’s

stubbornness, which was really not so bad, he thought. Certainly, he still had not received her father's blessing, but he was ready to throw himself at Lord Seabrook's feet the moment the Duke finally gave up.

And it seemed that it would be soon. The Duke opened his mouth to speak, but no words came. He looked around, realised he was being stared at with a grim disgust by everyone in the sanctuary. At last, the Duke pushed through them, storming towards the door with his fists clenched and his face red.

The moment he was out the door, the remaining few turned to one another.

"Are you all right?" Lydia asked Darius, gently touching his face.

"Yes, I am. I suppose I deserved it for interrupting his wedding," he said with a laugh.

"You were a real hero," Lord Seabrook said.

"Oh, I am not so sure of that. I was unable to make him leave. You, however, finally managed to make him do just that," Darius replied.

"Only because I insulted his masculinity. I find that it does wonders for getting rid of someone when you want them gone," Lord Seabrook said.

Darius was, at last, standing to full height. His nose and cheekbone ached from the force of the punch, but his heart was full at least. He knew in that moment that everything was truly going to be all right, although he was not sure why he had such confidence. After all, he was glad to have gotten rid of the Duke, but there were still so many things to work through, so many things to figure out.

Lord Seabrook rushed over to his wife and the vicar quickly came to take a look at Darius.

"It looks like he hit you quite hard," the vicar said.

"Yes, but I am all right. I do not think he will come after me again. It is all over now and he will only humiliate himself if he tries," Darius said.

"It was a good thing you did. Coming to rescue Miss Seabrook, I mean.

I should hate to learn that I performed the ceremony for a man who did not respect the sanctity of marriage,” he said.

“Well, you worked hard to be rid of him as well, and for that I am grateful,” Darius said.

The vicar then looked between Darius and Lydia and smiled.

“It is quite all right,” he said. “I have a very strange feeling that another wedding will come soon enough.”

Chapter Thirty-Six

Lydia was still shocked by everything that had taken place, but she could not help feeling overjoyed in the midst of it all. She was thrilled to know that she could finally be free of that man, but was still hopeful that she might have the love she truly longed for.

With the Duke gone and no more reason to delay, Darius fell before her to one knee. She looked down at him and put a hand to her mouth to stifle her gasp. Despite all the hopes she'd felt, she could hardly believe that he was going to do this here and now. Was he truly proposing after such a shocking ordeal?

"Miss Lydia Seabrook, I know that I have very little to offer you. I know that my wealth is scant and I am not the sort of man you may have dreamt of marrying in your youth, but I love you," Darius began.

Lydia's heart melted. She longed for him to say more. She wanted him to ask her, to just ask so she could finally tell him yes.

"It has come to my attention that the letters I wrote to you were given over to the Duke. However, I wrote you a great many poems. One of which, I should like to recite to you now," he said.

Darius cleared his throat and began.

"Climbing every step and tower,

Through the shade and through the bower,

Longing just to meet my flower,

Even now in this dark hour.

Through the woods and over trees,

Sailing upon the crafty seas,

*In the heat or in the freeze,
I see her and fall to my knees.
There amidst the brightness of day,
I come to take her aft away,
And if she choose instead to stay,
My own heart, then, I must betray.
I must leave her there behind,
Even if it torture my mind,
For if this be the fate I find,
I am but a man, wretched and blind.”*

“It is beautiful,” Lydia said, although the tone of the poem was so sad that she could hardly imagine why he was reciting it now.

“If you will be patient with me for just a moment longer, I should like to add one final stanza,” he said.

“As you wish,” she replied.

*“And yet still, I cannot tarry,
To remove the burden that I carry.
Thus now as my own emissary,
I must ask if she would consent to marry.”*

At that, Lydia could contain herself no longer. She threw her arms around Darius, delighted by his poem and his wish to marry her. She knew that he would do anything to make her happy and she trusted him with everything she had to offer.

Darius swung her in his arms and set her back on the ground. She looked him in the eye and he brushed a tear of joy from her cheeks.

“Does that mean that you will marry me?” he asked.

Lydia put a hand to her heart and nodded, barely able to speak for the strength of her happiness.

“Yes. Yes, today and yes, forever. I will marry you, Darius,” she declared.

He embraced her once more and Lydia leaned into him, amazed that she was able to have such a life.

“Ahem.”

Lydia pulled away quickly and turned, her smile fading when she saw the stern expression in her father’s eyes. In that moment, Lydia was reminded of the fact that he had not given his permission for any of this. Not only that, but he did not appear happy at all in that moment.

She hoped that he would consider everything that had just happened. Clearly, Darius was a good man. He loved Lydia enough to fight for her and to fight against the Duke. He was obviously the man she needed to spend her life with. Her father would have to see that.

But Darius was bold and brave, stepping forward to declare his intentions. Lydia held back, knowing that this was the duty of a man who wished to show respect and admiration towards the father of the woman he loved.

“Lord Seabrook, I know that I am not a man of noble blood, but I do hope that you will find me noble,” Darius said. Lydia nearly swooned, knowing that was precisely what she thought of Darius.

“I fear that a noble man without a noble rank is not often the sort of man who may be given the hand of a woman like my daughter. She comes from a high station, you know. And while I am grateful for all that you have done, it would behoove me to break with tradition,” he said.

Lydia was shocked. Although she’d told herself that her father could still say no, she did not expect that he truly would. Everything within her wanted to scream out in anger. Why would her father not approve? Surely he understood just how much Darius had sacrificed. This was a strange and unexpected turn of events.

Lydia looked over at her mother, who appeared quite upset and surprised as well. It was evident that everyone had expected Lydia's father to give consent based on Darius's character. Now that he was not doing so, it was a painful thing indeed.

"Father, please..." Lydia said.

"I am sorry, Lydia. But I cannot agree to this. You know that I want to see you happy, but this is a shocking thing to ask," he said.

"How is it shocking, Father? Did you not see everything that Darius sacrificed for me? Did you not see how hard he has worked to look after me?" she asked, challenging her father. Once more, the tears welled in her eyes. She couldn't believe that he was doing this to her, that he was ready to take away the happiness that was finally within her grasp. It was cruel and unfortunate. She couldn't bear the thought of being cut off from Darius just because he was not wealthy or titled.

"He is a good man, Lydia. But I want what is best for you. My daughter needs a husband who has prospects, a husband who can support her," her father said.

"But he can! He can tutor another just as he tutored me, Father. He did so well and you know that. How can you say that he has no prospects?" she challenged him.

"Because, my dear, I was the one who saw to it that he was paid for that work. I know precisely what it costs to run a decent home in London and I know that the amount I gave him each week was not enough to do so. You may be angry with me now, but you will understand one day. I must refuse this match because I love you dearly and I want you to be happy," he said.

Lydia's heart sank. She would not give up. She would keep fighting, keep trying to convince him to let her marry Darius. But it would likely take time. She would refuse every other man her father paraded before her. She would demand the opportunity to see Darius, or even to continue their work together if her father would pay him for it. That way she would still be with him until she could convince her father to let them marry.

"I really do like you, young man," her father said, turning to Darius. "Please understand that it is not you I wish to reject. It is only that I

cannot subject myself to a life of wanting.”

“Alfred,” her mother scolded. “Will you not allow them to just be happy?”

“A father must do whatever he can to protect his children. I must protect my daughter from poverty. That is the only choice I have now. And while I know that it is not the decision that you would have me make, I am asking it for the sake of her future happiness as opposed to the happiness she now believes she will have if I give in to this request,” he said.

“It is not a mere request,” her mother insisted. “This is love, Alfred. Are you going to take love away from our little girl? Is pride truly more important than that?”

But Lydia could see in his eyes that it was. She sensed that he had no intention at all of giving in to what she asked. And everything was for naught.

Lydia realised she had two choices. She could obey her father and let go of her hopes. Yes, she would continue trying to convince him to allow her to marry Darius, but it may not necessarily work. Or, she could run away with Darius. It would be difficult for him to ever find work again as it would ruin his reputation and hers. They would be destitute, and so would Alistair and his family.

She had two choices, but neither of them were very good.

“Begging your pardon,” Darius said, speaking up at last.

“Yes, Mr. Frost, what is it?” Lydia’s father asked, compassionately.

“There is something more which has not yet been discussed,” he said.

“Oh?”

Lydia was confused, not knowing what it could be. With such a strange day so full of one thing after another, how could there be anything more? What else did Darius wish to share with them?

“Indeed. You see, I understand your concern, Lord Seabrook. I know that I am a man of little means. As it happens, I was recently hired to tutor two young men and I will have a salary higher than that which I

received under your employ. However, there is more than that. Because if your daughter wishes to marry me, she may with ease as she is a woman with money of her own,” Darius said.

Lydia’s brows drew together in confusion. What did he mean? That made little sense.

“Are you suggesting that you would receive a dowry or any of her inheritance if you convince her to marry you? Now, Mr. Frost, I should say that is a very bold assertion and I do not appreciate it at all,” her father said, this time with anger in his tone.

“No! Good heavens, no, Lord Seabrook. I would never suggest something like that. Rather, what I mean to say, is that your daughter actually has her own money now. Or will very soon at least. It may not be a fortune, but it is going to be enough for her to get started,” Darius said, turning to Lydia and smiling.

It took her a moment to understand what he was saying, but once the realisation dawned upon her, Lydia’s heart burst with excitement.

“Do you...no. You cannot mean it. It is not possible,” she said in shock.

“As it happens, I do mean it. It is true, Lydia. You are going to be able to support yourself because you have achieved your goal. In this short time, you fixed your novel tremendously and have managed to get the attention of the publisher my friend works for. They are very eager to speak with you and have you sign an absurd amount of papers,” he said with a laugh of joy and amusement.

Lydia suddenly felt as though the entire world was at her fingertips. She was going to be published! Her work would be shared with the people of England! And she would be able to support herself and make the decisions she believed to be right and just. She would have a say in her own life, in what she wanted most.

The time had finally come for this and yet, Lydia could scarcely believe it yet. Even as Darius stood there before her, telling her that she had achieved her goal, she wondered if he was being honest. After all, how could a young woman such as herself find real success? She was not like those other women who had been successful, was she? Had she truly managed to grow her skill to that extent?

“Have you nothing to say on the matter?” Darius asked.

“Only that I have never been so happy in all my life. And it is because of you, Darius. You are the one who brings me happiness. You are the one who brings me joy. There has never been another soul I have known who could make me feel this way,” Lydia said.

“I am glad, Lydia. Still, I know that it may mean that we are never together as I should like, but even then, you have this chance. You may be happy now,” he said.

“What makes you think I could ever be happy if we are not together?” Lydia asked.

“I know how complicated it is,” Darius replied. “I know that your father does not approve, as he has only just told us. I know that society might struggle to accept the fact that a noblewoman such as yourself fell in love with her tutor. No matter how painful I would find it to walk away from you, I will do so if it is what you wish.”

“I have only just told you I do not wish it. I could never wish it. You must stop saying these things, Darius. I want only to spend my life with you. And if I am going to have money of my own, even just barely enough to get by, I shall accept it. I will do whatever it takes,” she said.

Then, turning to her father, Lydia knew that this was her last chance to convince him. He had to see that her life would be just fine, that she would be able to succeed and have a life of happiness and prosperity, even if they were never wealthy.

“Father, please. I know that you want me to be taken care of. I know that you wish for me to have a good life. But I am telling you that this is the only thing I want. I would never wish to spend my days in a room, sowing doilies because that is the appropriate thing to do. I would never want to succumb to the expectations of society when those things make me unhappy. This is what I want for my life. I wish to write books and to marry the man that I love,” Lydia declared.

She watched as the hesitation in her father’s eyes melted away, softening as he looked upon her.

“Oh, Lydia,” he said. “I wish that you knew how important your happiness is to me. But you could never know just how much I desire

it. And this is what you always wished for. You have your grand achievement. You are able to be independent just as you always hoped.”

“So what does that mean for you, Father? Will you accept the life I wish to live?” Lydia asked.

He looked between Lydia and Darius for a moment, clearly trying to fight against the pride that told him to refuse.

“You love this man and I can see that he loves you. Therefore, there is no reason for me to stand in the way of that. I consent,” he said at last.

Lydia let out a cry of joy, turning to Darius and seeing the relief in his eyes as well. This was it, the moment they had been hoping for all this time. They finally had her father’s approval. The future was theirs at last.

Epilogue

Alistair straightened the cravat around Darius's neck. He smiled and Darius grinned happily in response.

"Did you ever think this day would finally come?" Alistair asked.

"I did not. There was no reason to have hope that it would. With everything that we went through, only a madman would expect things to come together as they did. However, like has turned out quite perfectly," Darius said, contentedly.

"Indeed, it has. Although I still feel sorry for Mr. Henry, I am relieved that I finally have a chance to show my quality as a footman and I know that you shall make for an excellent husband," Alistair said with a laugh.

"Indeed," Darius replied, amused as well. He had been so happy when Alistair sought employment with Lydia's father and was accepted. He was thriving in the position and was finally able to properly provide for Elizabeth and the children. Elizabeth had even been able to stop selling bread and could spend all her time with the little ones now.

"How do I look? Am I ready?" Darius asked.

"Indeed, you look tremendous. I am hopeful that your bride will think the same," Alistair said.

Darius hoped so. He was so nervous, although he knew that there was no reason to be. Lydia had already made it perfectly clear that she loved him. She had done so many things to prove her love, even when she ought not have had to prove a thing.

She had fought for him, she had suffered for him, she had subjected herself to misery for him. There was nothing he didn't trust about her.

Darius simply wanted to hurry up and get to the church so that he could marry her at last. They had waited long enough.

“May we go yet?” Darius asked.

“Indeed, I believe that it is time,” Alistair replied.

With that, they rushed from the cottage Darius had recently begun renting. He had hoped it would be a nicer home for Lydia and had found it for a decent price. One day, he hoped, they would manage to buy a home of their own, but that would not happen soon by any means. And when that day would come, Darius would do everything within his power to ensure that it was a nice home for his wife.

Making their way to the church, Darius was a bundle of nerves. All he could think about was his excitement, knowing that he was about to marry Lydia. After everything they had been through, this was the only way it could end happily.

“Do you think she is ready?” he asked Alistair, nervously.

“I think she is every bit as eager as you are. Elizabeth told me that she would be helping Lydia get ready for the wedding and my wife is excellent with hair and fashion. Just because we are poor does not mean that she has no taste,” Alistair said.

“I know that is true,” Darius replied. “Still, I am anxious about Lydia. I hope that she is ready, that she is happy. It is not her readiness for this day that concerns me, but her readiness to give up the luxury in which she has lived all these years to have a life that is simple and dependent only upon ourselves.”

“There may be times when she will want to purchase something and you have to remind her that the money is not there as it once was, but I do not expect Lydia to struggle much with this. She has never been the sort of woman who demands such things,” Alistair reminded him.

Darius didn’t expect Lydia to ever be upset with him about money, but he still wanted to be sure that he was giving her the best life possible. Whatever they might face in the future, he had to know that he would do his best to provide for her and give her what she deserved.

At last, they arrived at the church and the coach came to a stop. With his heart racing, Darius climbed out and made his way to the church.

It was so strange to remember the events that took place just four months before at what was meant to be Lydia's wedding. She had escaped a dreadful fate that day and Darius was so happy that he had been a part of her rescue, even though he knew that he could not take all the credit for it.

Along with Alistair, he made his way into the church and there, to his surprise, he saw Lord Seabrook with a wide grin on his face, ushering Darius towards the front.

"Excellent. You are here. Now, you will have to stand here and wait. They were not far behind me. Lydia is absolutely beside herself with excitement. I feared that you would not be on time," Lord Seabrook said.

Seeing this side of the man was a relief to Darius. He had long hoped for acceptance and Lord Seabrook had been kind to him since the engagement, but there had always been times when he believed that Lord Seabrook was only trying to accept him for the sake of his daughter.

But now? It seemed as though Lord Seabrook was truly happy to have Darius there, that he genuinely wanted Darius for his son-in-law. And if that was true, Darius knew that everything would be just fine moving forward.

There were about twenty or so people present, just close friends and family who were eager to celebrate the union of the couple. Alistair sat with Elizabeth and their children,

Darius stood where he was meant to and when the doors opened to reveal his bride, he took in a gasp of air, seeing her beauty.

As Lydia made her way down the aisle in her ivory gown with little red rosettes made of ribbon that lined the hem, he thought he had never seen anything so lovely in all his life. Her hair was pinned up with the most perfect curls and those eyes of hers shone bright with joy.

For a long moment, Darius was too stunned to say or do anything, but when Lydia reached him, Darius stretched out his hand and took hers. He led her to stand before him in front of the vicar and gazed upon her exquisite smile.

“Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today to witness the marriage of these two people. They come before us as dear friends and family, two people who love and care for one another, who have proven that their love is greater than the whims and ideas of society. We come to see them joined despite the challenges they have faced and the threats they have overcome. It is truly my honour to officiate this wedding and know that they will love one another until the end of time,” the vicar said.

Darius couldn't help but nod, so happy he was that the vicar could see his love for Lydia. This was truly the most wonderful day of his life and he couldn't imagine ever being happier. And yet, he knew that he would be. After all, a wedding was just an event, but a marriage was a union and a commitment to one another.

“As we celebrate this union, let us bear in mind that love and respect are the two things which keep a man and a woman in harmony in the home. No matter the trials they face, no matter the struggles that come against them, it is these two traits which will enable them to remain close at all times, through the good and the bad.

“To those of you who sit here and wonder when you shall find such a love, look at the hearts of these two friends, who have given all they can to be together. They have made every sacrifice and endured in the promise that, one day, they would finally find victory,” the vicar said.

He led Darius and Lydia in their vows and as they each declared, “I do,” Darius's heart leapt. He wondered what his wife felt in that moment, but would not have a chance to speak to her about it quite yet.

At last, however, the ceremony came to an end and Darius took Lydia's hand as they were pronounced man and wife. He led her back down the aisle, with their smiles wide and full of hope.

Once they were outside and the others started to spill out from the church, Darius led her to the coach.

“My darling, bride. At last I may speak with you and now what you're thinking about. Are you happy? Did you enjoy the ceremony?” Darius asked.

“I did! It was so amazing. And you look so very handsome. Are you happy? Are you glad that we are finally married?” Lydia asked.

“I could not possibly be happier. This is a day I have longed for and it has finally come. You are the most beautiful bride I could have imagined. This is the greatest day of my life,” he said.

The coach started moving, taking them across town where Lydia’s father had rented a hall for the reception. Lydia leaned into Darius’s arms and he wrapped them around her, amazed that he could finally hold her and keep her close. It was a moment unlike any other. He had long hoped for this chance to be with her, but now she was here.

They rested in the silence, just enjoying this moment to be close. Nothing was in their way, nothing was keeping them apart. Darius longed to kiss his wife, but feared that he would ruin this moment if he moved. After all, she was so comfortable and he was as well.

They reached the hall and Lydia sat up straight just in time for the coachman to open the door.

“Here we are, my love,” Darius said.

They made their way out of the coach and inside, where Lydia’s mother and father were already present, along with many of the other guests who came for the reception. By the time everyone had arrived, there were nearly a eighty people to celebrate the day with them.

“Goodness, I did not expect such a vast number of people,” Lydia said with a gasp.

“Nor did I. But we shall have a lovely time nevertheless. Come. Let us dance,” Darius said.

As the musicians began their first piece, Darius led Lydia out to the dance floor and twirled her in a wide circle until she laughed heartily. Others quickly joined them and the entire hall was soon filled with merriment.

Darius had never seen Lydia appear so happy as she indulged in the dances and found herself in her father’s arms for a dance as well. From there, they enjoyed the refreshments and the lovely fruitcake soaked in rum and topped with powdered sugar. It was a most fashionable cake to serve and the guests were all delighted.

Never before had Darius imagined a wedding that was so decadent,

but he was happy that his wife had such a day. Elizabeth appeared to be enjoying every last moment of it as well. She had been a good deal happier since Alistair had begun working and his own mood lifted.

Lord and Lady Seabrook, likewise, appeared full of happiness. Not only that, but since Lydia's success as a writer, her father had begun encouraging her mother to write once more. After all, her daughter would no longer be in the home and there was no reason for her to not indulge in what she had loved as a younger woman.

"I am so very tired," Lydia said, leaning over to Darius as they finished another dance.

"Indeed? Yes, I suppose I am as well. Shall we take our leave soon? If you would like, I may call for the coach," he said.

"That would be lovely," Lydia replied.

Darius did just that and, before long, they were on their way to the cottage. He was exceedingly joyful and looking forward to taking Lydia inside and showing her his grand surprise.

As they walked in the front door of the home, Lydia gasped, utterly shocked by the sight she saw.

There it was, the novel with her name upon the cover. Tears filled her eyes as she looked at the book and held it in her hands.

"My book? You have a copy already?" she asked.

"I requested that they get me one in advance. John said he was happy to do so," Darius told her.

Lydia looked up at Darius and he gazed at his beautiful bride, overcome with emotion just as she was.

"You are the most astonishing husband in all the world," Lydia said.

"And you are the most incredible wife in all the world. But this is not the only gift that I have for you," he said.

"Oh? How could you possibly have anything more?" she asked.

Darius led her up the stairs of the cottage and to their room. The floor

was covered in rose petals that led to the foot of the bed where he had left something special for Lydia.

She smiled and walked gently over to pick up the paper that was sitting atop the blanket and she took a deep breath and began to read.

“What do you think?” Darius asked.

“I think it is marvelous,” Lydia replied.

Darius walked over to her and looked at the paper over her shoulder, reading his own words once more.

Once upon a time, there was a man who believed he could never trust those who had wealth. To his great misfortune, those were the very people for whom he was forced to work.

But one day, he arrived at the home of his newest student and discovered that she was nothing at all like those he had met in times past. Instead, he found that she was a gentle and kind woman, the sort with whom any man might be quick to fall in love.

Little did he know that there was another man, the very same man who had been so cruel to him in his youth, who saw that the woman could make him wealthy. So the cruel man sought to destroy their happiness.

Love, however, could not be overcome.

Doing everything within their power, the two fought to be together, to spend their lives in happiness and harmony. And when the time came that they had no choice but to defeat the cruel man once and for all, they pushed beyond his arrogance and coldness to find that they were able to have the life they always desired.

Together.

Now, the two have finally wed. They have been given the chance at a future unlike either of them had ever hoped for. But whatever happens to come next, they know that this is only the beginning and the best days are yet to come.

Lydia looked at Darius once more and threw her arms around him. He had worked hard on the simple summary of their life, ensuring that it told their story as well as he possibly could. And when Lydia pulled

away slowly and gazed up at him once more, Darius had but one thing in his heart still to do.

Gently, he leaned his head forward and brought his lips to Lydia's, kissing her with the promise of the best days that were yet to come.

THE END

Can't get enough of Lydia and Darius? Then make sure to check out the

[Extended Epilogue](#) to find out...

Will their union expand to more members of the family? Or will their two

hearts be enough?

Does Lydia's dream for the future include her family or her career? Will

she be able to choose?

What will eventually happen to the Duke of Moreland?

Click the link or enter it into your browser

<http://arianorton.com/lydia>

*(After reading the Extended Epilogue, turn the page to read the first chapters from “**A Race for the Duke's Heart**”, my Amazon Best-Selling novel!)*



ARIA NORTON

A RACE
FOR THE
DUKE'S
HEART

A Race for the Duke's Heart

Introduction

Laura Pike is not the quintessential English maiden people would imagine. She has never wished to become a lady, but rather enjoys being different... In fact, what keeps her happy is being outdoors and caring for her father, as well as spending most of her time with Patience, her horse. Little did she know her serenity would be disturbed for good when a runaway horse would appear at the bottom of the cliffside along the ocean. Her heart skips a beat though, when she sees its charming owner, Duke Owen Ellis of Blackmoor Manor. In her experience, all dukes are callous and deplorable examples of human beings, but upon first impressions of him, Laura is left feeling rather enchanted and therefore confused. Will Laura overcome her fascination caused by his enigmatic but warm presence, or will she allow her overwhelming feelings to blossom?

Lord Owen is the only heir of the Ellis name and Blackmore Manor following his father's death. As for his mother, it was expected that her wish for him to marry Lady Marjorie Fielding, a spoiled London heiress, would be fulfilled. Life has other plans for Owen's heart though, as when Laura is brought on as an equestrian trainer and tamer, he encounters warmth and affection for the first time. However, how could he betray his family's expectation of marrying Lady Marjorie, who despite appearing pretty on the outside, is rather cruel on the inside? A dilemma awaits him, as the journey of

becoming the man his father always wanted, would inevitably involve hurting the first woman he ever loved... In the end, which path will he choose?

Forced to choose between love and duty, the future is foreshadowed univiting, unless Laura and Owen can find a way to overpower whoever tries to keep them apart. Will their love and devotion prove that their romance is unassailable? Most importantly, how could they both find the courage to ignore tradition, and not dismiss their hearts' one true calling?

Chapter 1

“Your father has been dead for three years and yet you are still unmarried. You can’t produce an heir until you get married,” Lady Phoebe Ellis scolded her free-spirited son.

Lord Owen Ellis, Duke of Blackmore, sat slouched in the high-backed chair, staring absentmindedly into the fire and dreaming about riding his horse. Above the mantle, a stern-looking Lord Ellis glared at him disapprovingly.

A horse crop lay across Owen’s lap. He was dressed to go riding, in brownish-red tweed pants, a matching jacket, leather boots, and a pair of leather gloves to finish off the outfit. He had been on his way out to meet his riding companion when his mother had called him into his late father’s study.

She had been talking nonstop now for twenty minutes and he was bored and eager to get out into the sunshine. The birds were calling; he longed to smell the pine, oak, and moss and feel his horse beneath him as they rode through the woods, jumping over fallen logs and cantering to the cliff’s edge where the most beautiful view could be taken in. His mother did not seem like she was going to stop talking anytime soon. So, he sulked and stared at the fire, only half-listening.

“It was your father’s wish, Owen, that you marry and have an heir to carry on the family name. You are our only son—without your son to carry the name, the name of Ellis dies and with it the Dukedom of Blackmore.”

“You speak as if I don’t already know this,” he mumbled.

“Speak up, and sit up—you’re a duke, for heaven’s sake.”

He sat up in his chair.

“You spent too much time in that stable with Jack as a child. You seem to think you yourself are a groom. I know you tend to your own horse; you even muck the stalls.”

“Jack was more of a father than my father ever was, and you were not attentive to me, Mother. I had to find love elsewhere, and Jack was happy and kind enough to fill that role for me. Believe me, if I had a choice, I would be a groom instead of a duke. But I am a duke, and I take my responsibilities as responsibly as I can. No, I am not married, but I’m only 25, and people live a lot longer these days. I have time to find a bride and produce an heir.”

“Your father thought he had more time, but the illness took him. There are no guarantees in life, so we must seize the moments when they come. Now, since you can’t seem to choose a wife, I will, and you will not have any say. Not in her appearance, upbringing, or personality. Do I make myself clear?”

“Crystal,” he said, still brooding at the fire. “And I don’t care. I don’t care what she looks like, her upbringing, or her personality; she can have rein over the manor house. If I don’t like her, I’ll stay in the stables,” he added defiantly.

His mother sat across from him with a straight back and not a wrinkle in her demure long-sleeved, high-collared black taffeta dress. Gold and

garnet jewels decorated the otherwise plain ensemble. Her white hair was piled and pinned neatly on the top of her head while his was hidden beneath a tweed cap, which he now pulled off to run his hands through his dirty blond hair. He sighed loudly. His mother frowned at him but continued to prattle on.

“Since you will not take your responsibility seriously, I have taken it into my own hands. I have arranged a marriage for you with a proper well-bred young woman. I am in communication with her parents currently, to arrange for them all to visit before the Season begins. When they do, you will be a proper gentleman and you will agree to marry her.”

“Whatever you want, Mother. Marriage is of no importance to me, but it appears my marriage is important to you. So, you arrange it, pick the girl I am to marry, and I’ll show up and be the gentleman you expect me to be. I will provide the heir, give the lady whatever she desires to be happy, and I will spend my life with my horses, which makes me happy. Does that please you, Mother?”

She huffed. “I don't just want you to be married, Owen. I want you to be happy with your marriage, the way your father was with ours. Happy marriage could be your choice if you had the right attitude about it.”

“So, you’re not pleased.” He huffed, blowing his bangs out of his face.

“Will you not budge an inch?” she asked.

“No, I will not. I will do my duty, but that is all marriage is to me.”

“Marriage is a duty to the woman, not the man,” his mother quipped.

“Well, I don’t agree with that. It’s a duty to me, and that is all it will ever be.”

“Very well, I will arrange your dutiful marriage.”

“Well, it’s decided then.” He jumped to his feet. “I’m off to go riding. Horses are what I care about, Mother. They give me more pleasure than any woman could.”

He paused at the door, his hand on the handle.

“It’s a pity most women don’t care about horses. If I could find a woman who cared about horses as much as I did, well, there would be my perfect match.”

He winked and she swatted him with her fan as he kissed her cheek and headed out. He jogged jauntily down the stairs, whistling to himself, and headed for the morning room where his good friend, Colonel Charles Godwin, was patiently waiting for him. Charles wore brown breeches and a black topcoat. He had a riding crop and his leather gloves in his hand.

As Owen entered, he spotted Sophia Redman, a young lady who was staying with them at the request of her father, who had asked Owen and his mother to help her find a suitable, titled husband. She was dressed in a lovely white walking dress and in her hands was an embroidery ring. She was clearly flirting with the colonel, who was

clearly flirting back. He cleared his throat as he entered, and Sophia, seemingly startled, immediately turned and fled the room.

“Oh Sophia, I didn’t mean to—” he called to her, but she had already vanished. He felt guilty for chasing her away but what could he do?

“Is she afraid of you?” Charles asked, laughing and pointing in the direction Sophia had run off in.

“Honestly, I didn’t mean to startle the poor girl, or interrupt what I think I saw.” He winked.

Charles cupped his hand to his ear. “What’s that? I do believe Hermes is calling you. Your one true love.”

“So, I did interrupt what I thought I saw,” he probed. “Sophia is a fine catch.”

“Yes, but I’m not.”

“Pish posh! You’re still a nobleman’s son, you still have money.”

“I’m a colonel in the military because I have no money of my own. When my father died, my brother decided to cut us off, saying he needed all the money for his heirs. So, my friend, I am a penniless military man, a woman like Sophia is out of my league.”

“If I were a king, I would get rid of the whole class system and let everyone marry for love. There would be a lot less unhappy people that way.”

“Don’t you know dissatisfaction and oppression make the world go round?” Charles said and they both laughed. “It must, that’s the only reason I can think of that would lead to every ruler having the desire for it.”

“You’re not wrong.”

“No, but they are. Society is.”

“Don’t you dare speak those words in society, you’d be forever shunned for it—and I would be, too, by association. But in private and in all fairness, I agree with you.” Owen grimaced. “I look at my own town and wonder how I can help the people. There are so many poor and downtrodden, but I do not have a clue of what I can do.”

He shook his head, a sigh escaping from him. “I hope my wife is the kind of person who will knit blankets for the poor in the winter and who is not afraid of holding a crying baby or tending to a sick person. Someone with compassion. I do not want a stuck-up, selfish woman who wants to spend all my money on herself when so many people are in dire need.”

Letting his shoulders sink, he continued, “But I imagine that is exactly the kind of wife my mother has found for me: a shallow, vain, heartless woman who only wants to marry me for my money and title. A woman like that could never make me happy. But that is the way society women are raised, with their noses in the air.”

He heard a gasp and glanced at a pillar.

“Do you have something to say about that, Miss Sophia?”

She did not say a word.

“Not that I think you are one of those women. From what I can tell, you are not stuffy, shallow, or vain. You do not want to marry a man for his money or title—that’s your father’s wish, and I commend you on that.”

Owen smirked as he gave Charles a playful shove, and said to Sophia, “Ignore your father’s wishes and marry for love. You may be poorer for it, but you will also be much happier. Furthermore, I know a man who would gladly marry you, if you wouldn’t mind being a poor colonel’s wife.”

“Owen!”

“Is it true, or isn’t it?”

His friend nodded. “But Sophia deserves better than I could ever give her, she deserves—”

“Will you give her safety, happiness, and love?”

“Yes.”

“Then what more would she need?”

“Stability, for one. I’m a military man; I could be called away to battle at any given moment and, well, I could die, leaving her a poor widow.”

“Yes, and you could fall off a cliff or be thrown from your horse and die. You can’t live in fear of dying, my friend, you would never live.”

“Never live? I have lived through two battles, and I have seen the world—if one of us has never lived, it’s you, my friend. You never leave your estate,” Charles pointed out.

Owen whacked him with the crop and then began running towards the stables with Charles chasing after him.

Charles finally caught up to him and they began walking slowly, enjoying the balmy day. They followed the path to the stables, lined with flowers all in bloom in their beds, their sweet aroma perfuming the air. Owen took a deep breath, momentarily captivated by the gardens. He loved this time of year, as the world was transitioning from spring to summer. It was the perfect conditions for riding, and he wanted to spend every moment he could with Hermes.

“What’s got you bothered this afternoon?” Charles remarked, seeming

to notice his friend's suddenly morose demeanour.

“My mother.” Owen sighed. “She has decided it is time for me to do my duty and get married and produce an heir. I told her I had no interest, so she has arranged a marriage. Congratulate me, my friend, I am engaged.”

“To whom?”

“She did not say.” Owen glanced back at the house, worried realization dawning. “I wonder, though.”

“What,” Charles asked, pausing alongside him.

“If it’s her, I will refuse the match.”

“If it’s who?” Charles asked, not understanding Owen’s meaning.

“Sophia. I know you have feelings for her, and I wouldn’t dare take her from you,” Owen said as they continued. Charles was silent for a moment as he glanced back at the house.

“Her father would never allow us to marry,” he said at last, kicking the dirt with his boot.

“I’m a third son, untitled. I don’t have to face that situation. But at the

same time, I don't get to be with the one I love. I would rather she ends up with someone kind and someone who I know and trust more than any other titled man. She's a gentle soul, and I'd hate to see it crushed out of duty. Come, now, we're not talking about me, anyway, we're talking about you. If it's not Sophia, who do you think your mother has in mind for you?"

"I have no idea." They reached the stables, and Owen fussed and fawned over his horse. "Hello, old chap." He patted his horse's nose with love. "You ready to go for a ride, Hermes?" He ran his hand along the animal's coat till he reached the saddle.

The groom arrived, and Owen greeted him.

"Hello Jack! Did you hear the news? I'm to be married."

"Congratulations, sir."

"Don't congratulate me yet, I haven't met the woman. Mother has made the arrangements. I am to meet her and her parents at some point before the London Season begins. Mother casually decided it was not worth her time to tell me who they were."

"Well, I hope she brings you joy and happiness and a healthy heir."

"A healthy heir, sure, but joy and happiness are very unlikely unless she has four legs and a tail." Jack and Charles laughed. "I cannot imagine a wife would ever bring me joy and happiness, though I'd settle for a lady who knew her way around horses. Truth be told, though, what lady knows things of that nature?"

Jack laced his fingers and hoisted Owen up into the saddle, not replying. He helped Charles into his saddle, as well, before wishing the men a good ride.

They headed out of the stable yard and across the front of the house to the road. Beyond the road was a wooded area where they loved to ride.

“Promise me something, Owen.” Charles glanced at the house and, Owen realized as he followed his friend’s gaze, caught Sophia sitting in the upstairs bay window, watching them longingly.

Owen scoffed with disdain. The house was aged, brown stone with three steepled roofs on the sides with bay windows, turrets, and maiden’s towers. A squat square tower rose from the centre of the roof, and the front of the house was hidden by an arched shrub. An open archway allowed the carriage to bring them right to their door before moving on to the carriage house, and the garden was manicured to perfection. Owen’s mother would have it no other way.

Blackmore Manor was one of the largest and most lavish estates in the area, the envy of all. It looked like a castle and everyone admired it, but to Owen, it was cold and drafty and never felt like home, though he had lived there his entire life and was likely to live there for the rest of it. Blackmore Manor had always been the home of the duke, and it would be his home for as long as his family line continued.

“Don’t give up on the chance to marry for love. One of us should,” Charles said as they passed the house, headed for the wooded area beyond it.

“I was going to say the same to you,” Owen replied. “If I were to fall in love with a woman, completely, she would have to be a horse person—and how many ladies of society do you know who are horse people?”

He chuckled softly. “Ladies ride when and only when they must. They don’t enjoy it as men do, and they certainly don’t know how to care for horses. But if there is a woman out there for me and I find her, then I will marry for love.” He smiled. “Does that please you?”

“It will do, for now,” Charles said.

“Enough of this talk. Let’s give the horses the opportunity to stretch their legs, shall we?”

Charles smiled back and they picked up their pace, trotting across the manicured lawns and past the stone fountain surrounded by a bed of blooming flowers. They leaped the hedge separating the gardens from the untended field and cantered off towards the woods.

It was a beautiful day, and the trees were full of wonderful sounds; birds sang in the branches as they cantered through at a quick pace, jumping over fallen trees. Owen knew the path well—he had ridden it every day since he was a small boy. Jack had taken him under his wing and had practically raised him in the stable.

To Owen, Jack was more a father than his actual father had ever been. Jack had taught him life’s lessons and had taught him all he knew about horses. Owen had never been too vain or too proud to roll up his sleeves and get his hands dirty when necessary. He could find his

way blindfolded; he was sure Hermes knew the way as well as he did. Probably even better.

Charles struggled to keep up as Owen effortlessly jumped Hermes over another log.

“Shall we head to the cliff or the beach?” he called out over his shoulder as Charles urged his own horse to jump the log.

“The cliff. I just love that view,” Charles said as he once again circled his horse around and prepared for the jump. At last, he made it and, without praising his horse, he trotted on after Owen, who had picked up his pace again.

Chapter 2

The birds were singing in the trees, the sun was warm on her face, and Laura could smell the sweet fragrance of various flowers in bloom as she walked down the little dirt road leading away from the church, heading home to her elderly and disabled father whom she adored.

In her arms, she was carrying a bag of grain given to her by the church. Her dress was simple, cotton and blue, the colour of her eyes. She wore a delicate brooch at her collar and a black shawl was draped over her arms. Her hair was tied back with a ribbon. She refused to put her hair up; she was not a lady, so why should she try to look like one?

Her old leather boots peeked out from the hem of her dress as she walked. Her toes pinched because they were too small, but she tried to ignore that as she focused on the world around her.

As she walked, enjoying the day, she did her best to ignore her unwanted companion, the vicar, Adolphus Rumley. Her thoughts were far away, running through the woods on the back of her horse, where she longed to actually be. She was feeling annoyed and a little embarrassed by the sermon that was obviously directed at her.

She had been made the centre of the village's gossip wheel as of late, since the vicar has made his intentions made regarding her, and she despised the attention, both from the other village women and from the vicar.

"Your dress is as lovely as the sky, as beautiful as your eyes, and your hair is like the sky at night, or like the wings of a raven. Yes, yes, your

hair is like the wings of a raven. Have you ever thought to put it up like the other ladies your age wear it? You're not a child anymore, Laura, and it may do you well to act as such."

"I have no desire to look like the other women. I like wearing my hair down, and I'm not about to change that. I am also aware of my age, and I do not care for your pestering me about my appearance."

"Perhaps if you conformed to societal ways, you'd be more likely to find a husband. Then again, I am glad I have no competition for your affection."

"I have no affection for you or anyone else, Vicar. I have no affection for anyone but my father, and that isn't likely to change anytime soon."

"You're far too pretty a girl to be a spinster."

"Are you attempting to flirt with me, Vicar?"

"Wasn't it obvious?" He blushed. "Not very well, it appears."

"You're wasting your time—nothing you could say would impress me, or change my affections. I am simply not interested. Good day, Vicar." She picked up her pace, but to her dismay, he would not be brushed off so easily.

"Look, Laura, I've never been good at the courting ritual. I am much

better with the sermon, like today's. I was rather pleased with it. I wrote it with you in mind.'

"I gathered as much, on both accounts." She rolled her eyes and kept walking.

He began reciting the sermon, much to Laura's dismay. "When a woman marries, she becomes her husband's property. A woman's duty is to her husband. She must keep his house orderly, cook his meals, and tend to his every need.

"A woman's job is to bear and raise his children. A woman must put the needs and desires of her husband and children before her own. For example, say the woman wanted to go riding. She was used to being free to ride all afternoon, but when she becomes a wife, she must first tend her husband and second tend her children, leaving no room to tend to herself or her own fancies.

"A woman should be the first to rise every morning and the last to bed unless her husband calls her to his bed. A woman—" He reached for her free hand. Laura quickly moved the bag of grain into that hand to avoid the contact.

"You're not making your point any better, Vicar," Laura stated coldly.

"Please, I've asked you to call me Adolphus."

She scoffed. "Why would I call you that?"

“That is my name.”

“I feel it wrong to call someone I am not close with by their first name,” she said, picking up her pace again. He caught up to her and, noticing she was now holding the grain in her arm closest to him, he sneakily moved to the other side of her.

Custom dictated it was necessary for the man to walk on the outside toward the road, so the woman did not get drenched by a carriage splashing in mud, but seeing there was no mud today, that was clearly not a worry on his mind. When he once again tried to take her hand, she turned and dumped the heavy sack of grain into his arms.

“Because you seem overly interested in holding something, you may carry this for me. It’s a far better use of your hands than trying to hold mine because, as I have expressed, I have no interest, and will therefore not give you permission.”

“Laura, I am your best chance at a decent life,” the vicar stated, a look of surprise on his face.

“You think making me serve your every desire is giving me a better life?” She scoffed. “I have a good life. I am incredibly happy in my life because I have freedom and I can go riding all afternoon and no one tries to stop me. I see to my father’s every need, and I still find time to ride every afternoon. If I became your wife, I would die of boredom.”

“Boredom? You would be too busy with the cooking and cleaning to ever worry about boredom. Your chores would keep you terribly busy, and when those were done, you would have other duties—the duties of a vicar’s wife. A vicar’s job is never done, and neither is his wife’s.”

He paused, taking a breath.

“Your father won’t live forever, and you’re not getting any younger. Do you want to end up in a poor house when your father dies, leaving you in debt? A woman cannot own property—your little stable will be sold, and your horses will be sold to the glue factory. If you agree to marry me, I could offer you a good home and I could pay off your father’s debt. I would even let you bring your horses, though there would not be much time for riding between the chores at home, the duties of a vicar’s wife, and your wifely duties. I am a holy man, Laura. I follow God’s word to the letter. What better could you find?”

They had arrived at her father’s cottage and her horse, Patience, called out to her from her paddock.

“What man wouldn’t be better than a man attempting to force himself and his wishes on a woman? As it stands, I always find time for riding.” She stopped to pet the nose of her horse. “And another thing, having money doesn’t make you holy.”

He stopped in his tracks and turned red in the face. Then he dumped the grain back into her arms and stormed off.

She watched him as he walked away, muttering to himself.

“Why are only men like him interested?” she asked her horse as she stopped to pet her.

“Why can’t I find a nice man who loves horses as much as I do? Maybe a groom from one of the estates. He doesn’t have to be

handsome. He just must love me, and he must love horses, not just see them as a tool.”

The door opened and her father appeared.

“I know I am not a lady, but I do wonder if I would be treated better if I were.”

“Not necessarily, my girl. You’re a good person and a man’s behaviour depends on him, not on you.”

“I will never marry, Father, but it doesn’t matter so long as I have you and the horses,” Laura stated confidently as she put the sack of grain away.

He coughed and she turned to him. “What are you doing out of bed?” she chastised as she ran to his side. She hooked her arm over his and helped him back to the rickety old bed.

“You bring joy to me when I see your pretty face.” He touched her cheek lovingly as she fussed with his pillow and blankets, trying to make him as comfortable as possible. Then, she went to the stove and put on a kettle of broth.

“I saw the exchange between you and the vicar.” He started coughing between sentences. “I am glad you sent him away empty-handed. You can do better than that, Laura. Don’t let anyone tell you that you can’t.”

“Rest!” she scolded. “Once you’re asleep, I can go riding,” she added with a twinkle in her eye. He laughed, and that sent him into another coughing fit. She got him a glass of water before continuing. “No more talking or laughing,” she told him. “I need you to live long enough for me to find my happily ever after.”

“You’ll find it.” He patted her hand. “Just be patient. The right man is out there, just waiting for you.”

She stirred the broth and then, using the grain she had been given, she set to making bread. She used the last egg, the last of the salt, and a cup of flour. When the dough was ready, she imagined it was the Vicar’s face as his words played through her mind again.

“The nerve of him,” she said out loud.

“What?”

“The vicar’s sermon this morning, it was meant for me.”

“What was it about?”

“The duties of a married woman.”

“Oh, dear.” Her father shook his head. “The man is desperate. You’re the prettiest unclaimed girl in town. If he cannot have you, he will end up with one of the Ryerson twins.” Shaking his head and

laughing, he said, "Poor girls, they got hit with an ugly stick."

"Jamie Ryerson would make the perfect vicar's wife. She's so sweet and everyone already adores her, but I would not even wish the vicar on her. Just the way he talked about how a woman's duty was first to her husband and then to her children and how she had to put aside her own desires and time for theirs like hers don't even matter..." She pounded the bread.

"He used me as his example. I love to go riding every afternoon. If I were to marry him, I would not be allowed to do that, because I would not have time. I tend to your every need and I still find time to ride every afternoon. It's not as though he lives in a palace. The vicarage is not much bigger than this stable. I could easily get all the chores done."

She grunted and pounded her fists into the dough again. "I don't know what I'm carrying on about. I'll never agree to marry him, and you won't make me, so I have nothing to worry about." She threw the dough onto the table and began rolling it out. After filling it with ground nuts and apple slices, she folded it up, sealed it shut, and put it on the baking stone by the fire to cook. She stoked the fire and added an extra log. "Are you really in debt?"

"In debt? Who told you I was in debt?"

"The vicar did."

"No. I'm old, poor, and crippled, but I am not in debt."

“He said when you die, if I’m not married, I’ll end up in a poor house.”

“No, if you’re not married when I die, go to a nunnery. At least there you could still ride and I will know you are safe, God will look after you.”

“Yes, that’s what I should have told him, that I’d rather be a nun than marry him.”

“But I do hope you marry and give me grandchildren. I’m elderly and crippled but I’m not fatally ill. I won’t be dying anytime soon, so you can stop fussing.” He started coughing again and she got him a glass of water.

When the bread and broth were ready, she served it to him and then took her own small meal. She washed the few dishes after they’d finished eating, and when her father was finally asleep, she saddled Patience, pulled herself up into the saddle, and headed out for the woods, straddling the horse’s back like a man.

The birds were calling to them and they were obliged to follow. There was nothing Laura loved more than riding Patience through the woods, jumping logs and cantering to the cliff’s edge where the most beautiful view was to be had.

The cliff overlooked the ocean, and she could sit there atop her horse staring out across it. Sometimes, she would see whales and other sea life, or ships on the horizon coming and going. She wondered what was beyond the water.

She had heard and read about the Americas. She wondered if it was as wonderful as she imagined; not that she had any desire or way to get there, she just liked dreaming about it. Maybe after her father died, she would sell the stable and book a one-way trip across the water—surely her chance at a happy life was more possible there if she did not find it here.

The prospects were getting thinner and thinner with each passing day, but she refused to believe that Adolphus or men like him were her only option. Surely, there was someone else. She would hold out if it took, and if it never took, she would be content if she had horses to love.

She heard riders approaching from the west, where the wealthy lived. Not wanting to be insulted or abused by them, she quickly made her escape back to the clearing where she knew they were not likely to go. As she rode away, she could not help but turn and see the most beautiful horse appear on the cliff.

She admired it and then glanced at the rider and gasped—it was Lord Ellis, the Duke of Blackmore. His companion was less elegantly dressed, but they looked dangerous and out for a bit of fun. She turned away and picked up her pace, afraid she would be caught and dragged into whatever wicked game they chose to amuse themselves with.

Young lords like that were cads. They were self-absorbed, selfish and they took what they wanted when they wanted it. They did not care who got hurt in the end as long as they had their fun. If something did happen, she would be forced to keep it a secret, and he would never be charged or reprimanded for it. And she would be ruined—not even the vicar would want her after that, especially if she bore his child. A child who would be branded a bastard for his entire life. A royal by blood without the right to anything.

She picked up her pace and made it safely to the clearing. Her heart was racing, and she had to dismount and lean against a tree till it stopped and she had caught her breath again. She glanced nervously about, but there was no sign of the riders.

Chapter 3

Owen had only glimpsed the horse's rear as it galloped away. He and Charles were still out riding when the sun began to set. They stopped at the cliff's edge to admire the view as the sun set over the water. There were fresh tracks in the dirt from another horse.

"It appears we chased someone away. Do I have a reputation around here that I don't know about?"

"No, everyone loves you."

"Do *you* have a reputation around here that I don't know about?" he teased.

"Ah, will you look at that view?" Charles said, ignoring him as they pulled the horses up to the cliff's edge. "Is there anything more beautiful?"

"I thought Sophia was the most beautiful thing you had ever seen, my friend," Owen joked.

"Yes, Sophia is more beautiful than this view," Charles admitted. "But I was wondering what you thought was more beautiful than this view. Surely you don't think Sophia is more beautiful."

"No, I don't find her beauty as alluring as you do. No, I can't say have

ever seen anything more beautiful, yet.”

A sudden noise from behind them spooked the horses and Hermes reared up, catching Owen off-guard as he flew off the horse to land a few feet away. Then, Hermes took off running.

“Owen!” Charles jumped from his horse and rushed to his friend’s side.

“I’m all right, go after him,” Owen said, picking himself up. Charles jumped back on his horse and raced after Hermes.

After dusting himself off, Owen started grumbling to himself, wondering what had upset the horse. He was a beautiful horse, but quite temperamental and spooked easily. Owen should have been more careful. It would just kill his mother if he were hurt or worse.

He felt guilty as he picked his way down from the cliff. He hoped Charles had found his horse. He did not fancy the idea of losing Hermes.

He was invested in the stubborn horse, both emotionally and financially. He had come from the best breeding stock in the country and had cost his family a small fortune, but the moment Owen had set eyes on him as a youth, it was love at first sight and he would have given anything to make him his.

He longed to find a bride that way, but no one had ever sparked that feeling in him and it was not for lack of searching. He had searched for years for a bride, attending every stuffy ball, and going to Bath

each Season, but every year he walked away annoyed and disappointed. All the girls were the same—shallow, vain, and chasing men with titles. There had been many who would have gladly been his wife, but he had not liked a single one.

He was also not like other men of his time. He was still a virgin and intended to remain so till marriage, for he had no interest in deflowering a poor, innocent girl just for his pleasure, nor did he like the idea of partaking in the sleazy brothels.

He saw sex good for one thing: procreation. He would create an heir, possibly a spare, and that would be it. If the child showed even an inkling of interest in horses, he would gladly teach him or her all he knew. If wanting a wife who loved horses was too much to ask for, then perhaps he could have a child who did.

He was still lost in thought as he made it down to a clearing. He had never been near this area before, had never ventured this far past the cliff. If he wanted to go to town, he would travel down the main road.

He broke through the clearing and instantly he spotted his horse. “There you are, you naughty old boy!”

He stopped, noticing Hermes was not alone. He was being petted by the most beautiful woman Owen had ever seen. Not even her drab brown riding dress could disguise her beauty. He was mesmerized by the sight before him.

The woman was silently standing there, petting him, soothing him. Her back was to Owen, so she did not see him. Then he noticed her horse, the same colour horse as the flank he had seen galloping away. He smiled and slowly approached her horse. He clicked at it and the

horse responded, stepping forward, and he rubbed its nose. The horse was beautiful, as beautiful as its owner. He petted the horse while watching the girl continue to communicate with his own mount.

Owen thought he was the only one who could soothe Hermes, but he seemed perfectly content and they seemed to be having a silent conversation. Hermes's tail swished occasionally, to bat away a fly, but other than that he seemed entirely at peace. It was fascinating. *Not only is she the most beautiful woman I have ever seen, but she has a gift, something I have always desired to learn. Now here, here is a kindred spirit, a woman I could be happy with. Though a beauty like that surely already has a suitor, if not already a husband.*

He grabbed the reins of the other horse and led it over. "His name is Hermes," he said, slowly approaching. "We were out riding, and he got away from me."

"I'm so sorry, my lord," she said and then backed away. He held her reins out to her and they exchanged horses.

She jumped onto the back of hers and rode swiftly away. He had caught her throwing her leg over and smiled. This was a woman who not only knew how to whisper to horses but who knew how to ride them. He was smitten.

But then his thoughts became downtrodden—she was young, perhaps too young for marriage, he had assessed, seeing her hair free and loose. Women his age were already wearing their hair up. He guessed she was probably in her teens, late teens perhaps, but she still had that childlike appearance.

"Wait! I don't even know your name!" he called after her. "Could you

teach me how to do the thing you did with my horse?" He reached his horse and gave his nose a rub. "You're not trying to be a matchmaker now, are you, old boy?"

He laughed and then swung up into the saddle. He looked back in the direction the woman had ridden off in. "Let's see if we can find her."

He turned his horse in the direction she had fled and they started off, but after some time unable to find her, he headed back towards the cliff to find Charles.

"You found him!"

"Actually, a beautiful woman found him and soothed him. She had the most spectacular raven hair and the prettiest blue eyes, but when I approached, she ran off. I did not even catch her name. You wouldn't happen to know who she is, would you?"

"A woman with raven hair and blue eyes? I have seen someone like her around the village, but no, I am afraid I don't know who she is. I could ask around for you. What do you want her for?"

"To thank her properly, for finding and calming Hermes so that I didn't have to run all over kingdom come to find him," he said aloud, but in his mind, he answered, *my wife*. Owen started home, forcing Charles to catch up.

"Could it be? Owen Ellis, in love?"

“Hardly, I just feel a proper thanks is in order. After all, my horse is prize breeding.”

“I’ll ask around town.”

Charles turned and headed towards town while Owen continued to the house. He got Hermes settled in his stall, then he draped his jacket over the door, rolled up his sleeves, and, after unsaddling his horse, he began to brush him down.

“Well, you certainly had an adventure old boy. Did she tell you her name in that conversation of yours?” he teased.

He could not get the picture out of his head. The way she stood so close to the horse, unafraid, the way she expertly rubbed his nose as if she had known Hermes her whole life. The way she had seemed perfectly content standing there stroking the nose of Owen’s horse until his oafishness had chased her away.

He chastised himself, hoping to himself that he was gifted the good fortune of meeting her again.

Chapter 4

Laura was riding Patience along the cliffs and enjoying the beautiful summer day, her hair flying free behind her as they rode. She stopped to take in the view when a horse and rider pulled up alongside her. She recognized the horse and the man on top of it.

Laura turned her horse to leave, but Patience was already moving toward the other horse, expressing some curiosity.

“Well, hello again,” Owen greeted her, removing his hat.

“Hello,” she said curtly, nodding her head.

Only those living under a rock would not know who the Duke of Blackmore was. She could not help but admit he was handsome, but he was way above her station, so she averted her eyes. Men like that did not talk to girls like her, much less court and marry them.

By way of their last encounter, he had already proven he was not the ruthless rogue she had assumed him to be. His father had had quite the roguish reputation, and everyone had assumed his son and heir had inherited that trait, but so far, all he had shown her was a gentleman who knew and understood horses as well as she did. Although that thought warmed her heart, it did nothing to ease her nervousness around him.

“I wanted to thank you for what you did for Hermes. You have a way with horses that is remarkable.”

“My father was a groom, he taught me well.”

“Was?” he probed but she would not elaborate. “I am Owen Ellis.”

“Yes, I know who you are, your grace.” She nodded her head.

“Owen, please. Might I have your name?”

“What for?”

He laughed. “Well, no need to be haughty.”

She did not find that remark amusing.

“I was simply asking your name so I could thank you properly for finding my horse.”

“He found me.”

“Yes, I imagine he did, he’s always been attracted to beautiful women.”

She was looking down, so she did not see the smile or the twinkle in his eyes when he said it. She was nervous and ready to bolt and yet she longed to be with a man like him—not for his title and wealth, but for his obvious love for his horse and his obvious knowledge.

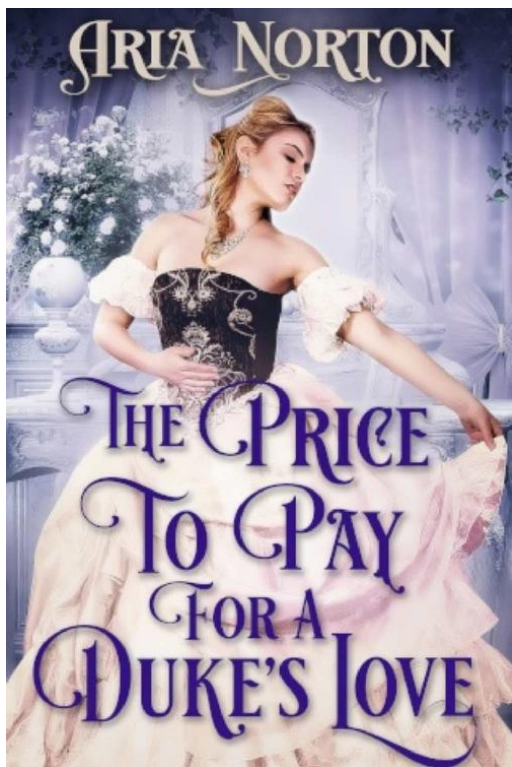
Want to read the rest of the story? [Check out the book on Amazon!](#)

Also, please turn the page to find a special gift from me!

Sign up for my mailing list to be notified of hot new releases and get my latest **Full-Length Novel** “The Price to Pay for a Duke's Love” (available only to my subscribers) for **FREE!**

Click the link or enter it into your browser

<http://arianorton.com/lilah>



[1]

This is a decent start, it just seems like a bit of an awkward sentence. Like ‘he said with a grin’ would sound better here.

[2]

It'd be nice to see him having this personality that's so repulsive, or her giving examples of it.

[3]

Why? Because of a significant age difference, or his repulsiveness or because he didn't ask her father, rather just her?... oh I see. I read it as permission to courtship.

[4]

Ahhh I see, I see.

[5]

Great first chapter. She's bold, and a bit desperate. I think she'll make for a fun story.

[6]

Yet...he's good enough to be a tutor? To impart knowledge on their arrogant children?

[7]

Ah so they have a difference in preferences...how will that play out I wonder. Will they argue and end up liking each other...

[8]

It'd be really challenging to do this, but to make an example scene that Lydia improves on with each lesson, like adding more to as they go over these themes/writing types would be really cool. It'd give the reader something they could actually see being improved on.

[9]

Yay goals! Even if they're really unrealistic.

[10]

Next best thing if you can't give the scenes themselves for whatever reason.

[11]

I don't really know what you're trying to say here...well I think I know the idea, something like 'and it is difficult to share characters who haven't had that'? Possibly.

[12]

Only writers can say things like this and not come off as crazy haha.

oh! Is she going to parallel her characters' love story with her own? That'd be so cool if you do.

[13]

Instead of telling us this, show us this. Give us his thoughts in that moment, rather than just say he was wondering about such and such a person. It helps create a more active narrative.

[14]

Has she given him any reason to believe otherwise? I really don't think she has.

[15]

He's such a flawed character. In a good way. I'm hopeful to see his arc become dynamic by the end of the plot.

[16]

Showing the reader her process would really help here.

[17]

Or you know, insult her entire female line of women authors that surely he knows about?

[18]

Make sure you stick to your outline. Like in the beginning the antagonist approaches Lydia after they've had dinner and she would have had plenty of instances to refer back to, even flashback to, as needed to give the reader a sense of what previously transpired.

[19]

Okay! Picking up from this point.

[20]

Awe poor thing. Good details here.

[21]

Nice foreshadowing here! Love this plot point.

[22]

I think you already did Lydia ♦♦

Also I like this continuation of their falling for each other part.

[23]

Oh yes! You included the poem. <3

[24]

More like, trouble finding her.

[25]

I love that you actually explain it out with the traits they like about each other. As a beta reader, I feel like I'm constantly asking authors to expand on these things to help the reader get a well-rounded picture of a blossoming romance, and you take it a step ahead by already doing that.

[26]

I'm glad it helps! I tend to get too 'in the head' of characters and have to balance it so it's not just a run-on of their thoughts. I'm glad this part is helpful.

[27]

If you want to, it could be nice to include subheadings of POV shifts, just so the reader knows what's going on and can follow along better.

[28]

Oh nice, raising the stakes!

[29]

Oof.

[30]

I think she needs to kind of circle into this a bit sooner. She says this now, to act as Lydia's protector/sway her father, but before she never really said any of this, I don't think.

[31]

Oh Darius. You've got yourself into a pickle. How is he going to fix that in eleven pages...

[32]

Eight pages, Darius. Eight. Pages.

[33]

Oh here's a perfect spot to include an emdash. ♦♦

[34]

I added it, but wasn't sure about it when I first wrote this as that is supposed to be written on a page and when interrupted in her letter, Lydia wouldn't have place an emdash.

[35]

Oh I stood corrected, this will not be resolved in eight pages. You have all the time you need Darius.